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# THE HIGH ADVENTURE







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By  
JOHN OXENHAM



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## CHAPTER I

### ISLE OF PEACE—STORM

THE Captain and the Chief Engineer of the *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* were coaling their ship in the calm and leisurely fashion which befitted their official standing and surroundings.

No wildest exaggeration could describe the tiny wharf as jutting out into the placid lake. The very utmost that could be claimed for it was a mild suggestion to any passing craft that, if it really was on the look-out for a landing, it might go farther and possibly fare worse.

At the moment, however, the wharf was cumbered and crowded and busy beyond its wont, by reason of the dozen very small bags of coal which the Captain and the Chief and Only Engineer were casually carrying on board the *J.-J. Rousseau*, and perfunctorily emptying down a small black hole in the small white deck.

When the last small bag was emptied, and the Captain had gently kicked all the stray lumps into the hole, the Chief and Only Engineer got a soft brush and swept the deck, and then dipped a mop overboard and lightly touched away the last remaining traces of disorder.

The young man in the easy shooting-suit, who had walked across from the station carrying his own portmanteau because no one had offered to do it for him, had got as far away as possible into the bows when the coaling operations began, and had lit a cigar, and watched it all with the tolerant amusement of one out for a holiday and to whom time was of no consideration whatever.



"Doesn't seem to be any great rush for the boat," he said to himself. "Glad I made sure of lunch, anyhow. Suppose we'll start sometime."

And when the Captain had finished the story he had been reading in a weekly paper when duty called him to the coal-bags, he lit a long thin cigar, gave a searching glance along the shady avenue that led to the station, to make quite sure that no fellow-citizen was endangering his health by hastening to the boat, slipped a cord attached to the wharf off a cleat by his side, and the Chief and Only Engineer let himself down feet foremost through the opened glass top of the engine-room and pulled a handle.

The *Jean-Jacques* purred softly and crept away from the friendly little wharf, in a quiet and furtive fashion, as though anxious to escape unobserved without any suggestion of offence. The Chief and Only Engineer crawled up through the open window, lit a long thin cigar, pulled a paper out of his blue linen pocket, and balanced himself on the rail whence he could look down into the machinery, and gave himself up to study.

The Captain slid a loop of string over a spoke of the wheel, lest the *Jean-Jacques* should take to wild and unusual courses, unlocked a box, took out another smaller box and opened it, and in the character of Purser, looked invitingly across at the solitary passenger in the bows.

The young man rose obediently and strolled along and requested a ticket for St. Peter's-insel.

"You're not overcrowded to-day, Captain," he said pleasantly in German.

"It is late in the season, you see."

"I suppose I'll be able to get a room at the hotel there?"

"Oh, yes. You stop?"

"Yes, I thought of stopping a week or so. It's a nice quiet place, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, it is quiet."



"Permit me to offer you a cigar," and the Captain graciously accepted it and placed it carefully in his waistcoat pocket.

"And you, Herr Engineer?" and the Chief and Only graciously accepted one, and placed it carefully somewhere inside his blue linen jacket.

The Captain, as Purser, clipped the ticket he had just been paid for, collected it, locked it up in his box, and as Captain hauled out his weekly paper, subsided on to his seat and started another story. And the *Jean-Jacques* rolled quietly on across the blue mirror of the lake towards a tiny red-roofed village, which sprawled up the sides of a wooded promontory, and lay basking in the late September sun amid its widespread vineyards, like a dapple of poppies among the corn.

"Erlach!" said the Captain quietly, as he slipped the noose from the wheel and the boat nuzzled up to the wharf, and waited. But the long road up to the village lay white and empty to the sun, so presently they loosed again, the Captain tied up the wheel, and he and the Chief and Only betook themselves to their literary studies once more.

Now the *Jean-Jacques* was jogging lazily along due north, skirting a long low shore of reeds and rushes backed by a dense tangle of shrubs, out of which, in one place, a clump of trees rose like an island in the midst of the lower growth. This, however, was not the actual shore of the lake, but an extraordinary peninsula, miles in length though but a few yards in width, which was slowly evolving itself out of the gradually sinking level of the Bieler See. On the other side of it was another broad stretch of water, then the eastern shore, and far away behind them a long serrated line of snowy peaks. The western shore of the lake was dotted with tiny white villages, set like jewels in a broad band of velvety green vineyards, and behind them rose the dark pine-clad heights of the Chasseral.



But the solitary passenger had just had lunch, the sun was pleasantly warm, and the cradle-like roll of the little steamer was eminently soporific. He was almost in a dreamy doze when the boat drew up again at a small wooden pier connected with the shore by a long slender plank-way.

"St. Peter's," murmured the Captain, and the young man woke with a start, picked up his bag and coat and stick, and stepped ashore with a nod and a good-day to the studious ones.

"Where's the house?" he asked, for he could see nothing but trees and water.

"Other side."

So, not knowing how far the other side might be, he dropped his bag where he stood, hung his coat over the railing, and strolled inland in search of a lodging.

The path wound on and on through tangled undergrowth, with a pleasant chequer of light and shade from the thin leafage of trees, which struck him as having shot up too quickly for sturdy growth. Just outside the lower growth on either side, the lake gleamed through the tall rushes but a foot or two lower than the path.

He came presently to a massive stone wall about five feet in height, which rounded away from him on either side and disappeared among the trees above and the undergrowth below. It was a very ancient wall built of huge rough-hewn blocks without mortar, gray and mossy, with tiny ferns and flowers and creeping plants in every niche and cranny, and inside the wall was what he had come for—and more.

A slope led up through the wall into the island, and he found that the higher ground inside was level with the top of the gray stone wall, which clasped it all round like a solid granite belt and held it all together.



The path along which he had come had evidently at one time been below the level of the lake, and this break in the wall and the slope up which he had come had been a landing-place for boats. This firm rich turf, speckled all over with pale purple crocuses although it was late September, was the island proper, and here were long green glades, and mighty trees,—red-stemmed pines a hundred feet high and every one as straight as a ship's mast, and huge spreading oaks, and great fantastic beeches flinging out wild arms—it might be in welcome though it looked more like warning.

As he came softly up the slope, half a dozen lizards, basking on the great squared stones of the ancient landing-place, whisked out of sight, all except their tails, and then came peeping back for another look at so unusual a sight as a passer-by. Far away up in the blue above, the giant trees rustled a soft welcome—or a warning; and the young man stood and took a deep breath of delight.

"A find, my boy, a veritable find!" he said to himself. "If I had searched for a year I could not have found a more perfect place. Peace! Perfect peace! Those trees are like vast cathedral aisles. I could live here for a year and never tire of it."

A choice of ways invited him: to the left, a broad path, dim even at mid-day by reason of the thick green roof overhead, wandered away along the top of the gray stone wall; to the right a long stretch of meadow-land ran like a green drive till it swept round a distant corner among the trees; straight in front a rough path rose steeply among the pillared columns and led into dim dark heights and depths beyond. It was soft with pine needles and beech nuts, and set thick with traps of sprawling roots.

He took the path in front, and climbed the hill with a new spring in his step, and sniffed the sweet aromatic scent of the pines with rare delight.



"Heavenly!" he was saying to himself, when a pine-root, lurking beneath the cushiony needles, caught him by the foot and jerked his thoughts rudely back to earth.

And that was why—his eyes being bent to the brae—he saw nothing of her till she spoke.

"At last!—I began to fear you were never coming!"—a sweet full voice, quickened obviously with eager anxiety, and when he jerked up, in vast surprise, his eyes lighted on a sweet girlish face which seemed to him the very perfect embodiment of the voice.

She had come out from behind the great smooth bole of a beech, and stood waiting for him, a slim graceful figure in a tailor-made dress, which a brotherly experience told him cost a very great deal more than you would have imagined; on her soft brown hair a black lace scarf; in her eyes, which he thought were very dark blue or violet, all the feeling of the quick words of her most unexpected greeting.

"Heavens!" said the young man to himself. "What a lovely face! Who the deuce does she take me for? I wish I was the right man!"

He had whipped off his cap, and stood facing her in silence for a moment. Then he answered her in very excellent French.

"I assure Mademoiselle I came as quickly as possible," he began lightly. "If I had known——"

"I have been in despair. I thought some misfortune must have overtaken you."

"What on earth——" began the young man to himself, and opened his mouth to ask her what it all meant, but she hurried on without giving him the chance of a word.

"No!" she said, with an imperious gesture. "There is no time for talking about that. It is all arranged. She is to get out on Friday night"—this was Wednesday—"you are to meet her and bring her to the boat you will



have waiting. The rest we have to arrange now, and that is what I am so anxious about. We could perhaps conceal her here for a day or two. I think they will not search here for her. They will expect her to go further away——”

More than once he had tried to check the sweet vehement flow, and each time she had stopped him with that quick impatient little gesture which would take no denial. And, truly, she was so amazingly beautiful in her vehemence that it was with regret that he felt himself bound to stop her at any cost.

“We might go by way of Morat and so by Noirburg to Thun, or we could try by Luscherz. What do you think?” she rushed on.

“Mademoiselle,” he said quietly. “I am sorry, but there is some mistake! I tried to stop you, you know. I haven’t an idea what you are talking about.”

A startled look came into her face.

“Oh!” she cried, and caught at his arm with a fierce little grip. “Are you not then Monsieur Bertel?” and she peered into his face with a look of anguished dismay.

“Not at all. My name is Verney—Charles Verney—attached to the British Embassy in Paris, and very much at your service, I assure you, Mademoiselle, if I can be of any use to you.”

“What have I done?” she gasped, and sank back against the beech tree, a perfect picture of beauty in distress.

“You have told me certain things by mistake,” he said quietly, “and for your sake, since it distresses you, I regret it. For myself—if Mademoiselle should see fit to honour me further, I will do all in my power to assist her. If not—I am an Englishman, and I give Mademoiselle my word to forget all that she has said—at all events never to divulge it.”



"You ought to have told me at once," she blazed angrily. "You had no right to——"

"But, Mademoiselle, I tried to as soon as I understood your mistake. I had not an idea what it was all about."

Then her swift anger passed, and only the misery of her grievous error remained. She dropped her face into her hands, and her slender figure shook with angry sobs, and then she plucked a tiny lace handkerchief out of her sleeve, and bit it with fierce little white teeth to keep the sobs from coming out.

"I am distressed beyond words," began Verney. "I have sisters of my own, you see——"

The tearful eyes flashed a quick searching glance at his face again, and he thought they looked like dark velvet pansies after a shower.

"If Mademoiselle would tell me how I could help her, I pledge myself to it, whatever it is," and the words rang truly on her tense-strung nerves.

"I thank you, sir," she said, with a fine effort at composure. "For the moment, please to forget everything. For the rest, I must think—and—and—there is so little time, and my head is in a whirl."

"I will forget till Mademoiselle bids me remember. Perhaps two heads could think better than one."

"Have you come to stop here?"

"I came seeking some place off the beaten track where I could have a month's rest. I had never heard of St. Peter's-insel till I tumbled across it in Baedeker this morning. I was going on to Evilard."

The girl nodded.

"I must think," she said briefly. "Perhaps"—and she looked doubtfully at him again—"I don't know. I must think," and she put one small white hand to her brow, as though to still the confusion inside. "Please go. The house is straight along there."



“I will go, since you bid me, Mademoiselle. But please believe me when I assure you once more that I would do anything else you would ask of me with still greater pleasure,” and he bowed with quite un-English grace, and went off along the wonderful dim avenue of this newly-enchanted isle.

“What a lovely, lovely girl!” he was chanting to himself, though his square-set shoulders and firm step gave no slightest hint of the mighty sentimental feeling that was dancing in his heart like the sunbeams on the lake over there.

He stopped at one place where a two-hundred-year oak had been felled, and looked at it pitifully, and then out over the lake at the long line of snowy peaks on the right, but he did not once look back at the girl.

She stood for a time watching him and drying her eyes on the tiny lace handkerchief.

“Oh, the fool that I have made of myself!” and the little white teeth ground together in anger. . . . “He looks good. . . . I wonder, I wonder. . . .” and she turned and went slowly and full of thought into the sombre depths of the wood.



## CHAPTER II

### ISLE OF PEACE—CALM

VERNEY strolled on along the dim forest aisle, carpeted here ankle deep with rustling leaves. The vistas on each side gleamed russet and green and gold and faded into shadowy distances, beyond which, since he was now on the heights, he caught the glint of the water below. He came at last to a little clearing walled with lofty trees, in which stood a pavilion of size, with a cupola roof and doors and windows all round it.

This was so far the only house he had seen; and the fiery, tearful girl he had just left, the only, but very charming, sign of human occupancy of this delectable isle of sleep.

He wondered if this could be the house of the island and she its only tenant. But a glance inside showed him it was only a huge summer-house, void of furniture, and evidently not much used.

"All the same," he said to himself, "I would live here for a year on the chance of helping that girl."

He went on along the broad path, found it a cul-de-sac, and turning haphazard into a by-path which seemed to lead down-hill, came out at last into an orchard, below which lay a long range of red-roofed buildings.

Very quaint and tempting they looked, as he came down past a farmsteading on the one side, all under one great



roof, with the sweet smell of cattle and grunting of pigs, and a wood-cellar as big as a church, piled high with winter firing. On the other side a heavy rounded archway gave entrance to a quadrangle, and just beyond it a walled flower garden stretched along the front of the house.

He passed along the garden wall to get a better view, and stood entranced with it all.

"It's just sheer delight!" he said to himself. "And to think that nobody seems to know of it!"

The old grey house, with its background of mellow foliage, its massive walls, its ancient red roof broken by dormer windows, its belfry soaring up like a small church spire—he learned in due course that the building had originally been a monastery—and its weather-beaten green lattices, gave him all the feeling of a newly-discovered treasure. Perhaps the thought that that lovely girl was living there had something to do with it.

Most of the green lattices were closed. From the window-sill of one that was open hung a crimson bathing-costume. Hers? he wondered hopefully.

It was all delightful beyond expectation. He would see what it was like inside. So he opened the latched gate in the old stone wall and sought a front entrance.

But he found all the lower storey given up, as in most Swiss houses, to work-rooms—in one a carpenter's bench, in another gardening tools, and so far he had not seen a soul but that beautiful girl in the wood.

Then, as he stood in one of the empty basement rooms, a murmur of voices caught his ear, and poking about in the semi-darkness he came upon a narrow doorway in the side-wall, and climbing a steep flight of steps found himself in a kitchen hung with gleaming pots and pans, and in the presence of a couple of busy women, who viewed him with good-humoured surprise.

He told them he wanted a room, and was promptly led



up a few more steps into a wooden cloister which surrounded the open quadrangle. His guide tugged at the handle of a great bell which hung above his head, and went back to her kitchen. A huge yellow and white St. Bernard uncoiled himself leisurely from underneath a table and lounged towards him with lazy curiosity in his deep red eyes. A pleasant-faced girl came tripping down a broad wooden staircase and greeted him with a welcoming smile.

"Don't touch him!" she said in German, as the young man offered his hand to the monster for inspection. "He is wicked with strangers. Barri, lie down! Lie down, I tell you!" and she emphasised the order with an imperative stamp of the foot. Barri, undismayed, completed his leisurely inspection, snuffled, and coiled himself up under the table to think it over.

"I want a room for a few days," said Verney. "My bag and coat are at the landing-place. Perhaps you can send for them. And what time is supper?"

The girl led him up the wooden staircase to a wide wooden gallery, opened the door of a room and flung open the green lattice, told him the dining-room was at the end of the gallery, supper was at seven, and she would send a boy for his things.

The room itself, with its comfortable-looking bed, its ancient panelling and white-scrubbed floor all worm-eaten and bitten into strange fantastic patterns, its antiquated chairs and great carved table, was all in keeping with the rest and all like treasure-trove to him.

He went over to the window and leaned out enjoyably. In front stretched the placid green lake, beyond on his right were the white peaks of the distant Alps again, from the sill of the next window hung the crimson bathing costume.

"I wouldn't mind stopping here for a year," he said to himself once more.



Out on the lake a boat—or was it a great water-beetle—was crawling slowly across to the western shore, leaving in its wake a half-mile fan of widening ripples like the tail of a watery comet.

He wondered when he would see the girl of the wood again. At supper-time, in any case, he supposed. He wondered if she would have made up her mind to let him help her; and he wondered much what her trouble could be.

He strolled about the rambling old house with great enjoyment, poked into some disused rooms piled with lumber, and discovered faded monkish frescoes on the plaster, and grotesque wood carvings and ancient chests black with age. He delved into great cellars under another heavy archway, and came on mighty cider-presses, and barrels the size of small rooms. He wandered about the farm orchard, and finally off along the side of a vineyard towards a row of stately poplars which rose out of a clump of trees by the lake side.

Here he found another landing-place and a small harbour full of boats, and as he stood, planning cool, delicious, early morning bathes off the end of the wooden jetty, and delightful moonlight excursions on the water, he saw a boat coming slowly across the lake and making for the island.

As it drew nearer his interest shot up suddenly to boiling-point. For the rower was slim of figure, and the crown of fair hair above identified her as the girl he had left tearful and anxious in the wood. From the slowness of her strokes, and the slight pause at the end of each, he saw that she was tired out. He wondered if she had found a way through her difficulties, whatever they were, and he wished much that she would afford him the opportunity of helping her.

The girl steered evidently by some landmark astern, for she came straight for the little harbour and never once



turned her head till she was almost in it. Then, glancing over her shoulder to mark her landing-place, she saw him coming down the sloping bank to give her a hand ashore.

She loosed her oars as the overhanging prow ran up the shingle, and stood up and lifted her black lace scarf from her shoulders on to her head, and it was a revelation to him that so simple a thing should add such dignity to so slight a figure.

He was glad to see, too, that she had quite recovered her equanimity. The sweet face was composed, even a trifle set in its purposeful firmness, but she looked very weary as she drew off the leather gloves she had worn for protection from the oars, and laid one white hand gently in his and stepped ashore, with a quiet, "*Merci, Monsieur!*"

"I'm afraid you have over-tired yourself," said Verney, with genuine concern. "Now that is a thing I would gladly have done for you, if you had told me to."

There was almost a whimsical look in the tired face as she glanced up at him, and said. "I could not then. Now, —it is different."

Verney shook his head. "I'm no good at puzzles. You are one vast enigma, Mademoiselle. What have I done in the meantime to earn your better opinion?"

"Nothing. It is what I have done myself, but I could hardly have asked your assistance."

The young man wagged his head hopelessly again. "I give it up."

"But you would still help me?" she asked quickly.

"To the utmost extent in my power. Only tell me how."

"After supper then, for I am tired now. Meet me here, M. Verney, at half-past eight, and you shall take me for a little row in the moonlight, and I will tell you then how you can, perhaps, help me."



“I am grateful to you for your confidence, Mademoiselle. Shall I walk up with you?”

“Please no. If you will go that way, I will go this. We shall meet at supper.”

“And afterwards!—I thank you!”



## CHAPTER III

### GLAMOUR

WHEN Verney strolled into the *salon* he found the other guests already seated at table, and, pending the arrival of more substantial fare, all chatting together in that quasi-friendly fashion which differentiates the continental from the British public table, by accepting even a stranger as possible until he is proved the reverse.

The room was large, with ancient panelling similar to that in his bed-room. There were windows looking out over the darkening lake, and windows at the end through which still glimmered the soft saffron and crimson of the lingering sunset.

The red-shaded lamps and great bowls of red and yellow roses on the table gave him a supreme sense of homely comfort, the comprehensive bow with which he took his seat was responded to by every one with courteous particularity, and once more he said to himself, "I have fallen well!"

Fallen most delightfully, too, he discovered, as to his position at table, for Mademoiselle sat exactly opposite him, and the great bowls of roses were placed with mathematical precision above and below her, with a shaded lamp between. And the chastened glow of the lamp lit up the beautiful face and the roses with a soft radiance, outside which, like a massive frame, was the outer darkness of the room and the rest of the company.

Next to Mademoiselle, however, was an elderly lady with



snow-white hair, and a pleasant, smiling face, and supper was barely started when she looked smilingly across at Verney, and said, in English, "They told me there was some one arrived who spoke English. It would give me such pleasure to hear and speak it again."

"It is very curious how an Englishman is always known even before he opens his mouth," said the young man, with a smile and a bow. "I have not spoken a word of English since I arrived, and yet, you see, I am labelled Englishman at a glance."

"One recognises an Englishman, no matter how well he speaks another tongue," smiled the old lady. "But you, Monsieur,—you are very English to look at."

"And yet I have lived very many years abroad, and French and German are almost as natural to me as my own tongue."

"All the same you are, I should say, typically English, and, truly, for myself I prefer the English type," said the old lady with a decided nod. "Oh, you need not fear"—as he shot a deprecating glance along the table,—“they none of them understand except my niece here”—indicating Mademoiselle. "And in what countries has your lot been cast, Monsieur, if it is not indiscreet to ask?"

"I was in Stockholm for a time, then in St. Petersburg, then Berlin, now Paris.

"And you do not prefer Berlin to all the others?"

"I do not,"—so emphatically that the old lady laughed out with enjoyment.

"And Petersburg?"

"It is well enough at times, but——"

"Yes," she nodded, "but—there is always the shadow behind."

"Exactly! There is always the shadow behind. But I must compliment Madame on her unusually good English.



Surely, it was not acquired anywhere but in England itself."

"I lived there for many years, and I love the English and their ways—except their climate, which is detestable. The fogs! And the mud-snow! Here, if we do have a fog, at times, it is at all events white, and our snow is snow, and it also is white."

"Yes, I'm afraid you beat us in little details such as that, but we have to put up with such things as best we can."

"You are attached to the Embassy in Paris, I understand"—from which he perceived that Mademoiselle had discussed him with the old lady.

"I am by way of becoming a diplomat," he bowed. "It is a long road, but not altogether unamusing."

"I had many good friends in Paris, but it is years since I was there. I wonder if we possess any in common—the de Montessonnes, the d'Auriacs, the d'Aubignés——"

"I know them all, more or less, of course. But Mme. d'Auriac is a very dear old friend of mine. It is very pleasant to think that you know her too," and though he was looking straight at the old lady, so great was his interest in Mademoiselle that he got the impression of something almost akin to a fleeting smile on the sweet preoccupied face, and wondered why.

They remained chatting together after the rest of the company had drifted away. It was not until Marthe had cleared all the rest of the table, and began to hover about them with a meaning air, that Madame rose.

"*Allons!*" she said, with a satisfied little laugh. "We are keeping little Marthe out of her bed. If we do not move she will be wrapping us up with the tablecloth and putting us away in the press. You will find one of the most charming places for an after-supper cigar down by the lake-side among the poplars over there, M. Verney."



"I will go and try it," he bowed, and went first to his room to change his dinner-jacket for something thicker, and took his coat over his arm as well, for the dew was almost as wetting as rain, and then sauntered off in the best of spirits and all agog with curiosity, to keep his appointment with Mademoiselle.



## CHAPTER IV

### MADemoisELLE EXPLAINS

HE had been there but a few minutes, leaning against the rail of the little pier, and watching the play of the young moonbeams in the ripples of the black water, when Mademoiselle came through the shadowy grove towards the boats.

He flung his cigar into the lake and sprang lightly down to join her. She was wrapped in a long cloak, and her face glimmered, pale and determined, in the shadow of the hood, with a haunting sweetness.

He threw his coat over the back seat of the lightest of the odd little craft and handed her in, then hauled out by means of the neighbouring boats and poised the pinned oars.

"Which way?" he asked. "Any choice?"

"Up this way, please," she nodded, and the boat shot silently off towards the distant foot of the lake.

He had rowed for a good ten minutes, till even the topmost pines on the summit of the island looked in the mystic moonlight very far away, before she spoke.

"Now, if you will light a cigar, I will tell you, and you shall help me if you will."

"I most certainly will if I can."

"And let me tell you first that I am not in the habit of confiding in strangers. I took you for some one else this morning. I had been awaiting him in very great anxiety, and when you came I made sure you were he, and—well, that was why I made such a fool of myself——"



"I am grateful to him for not coming. I shall consider myself his debtor for life."

"Why he has not come, I do not understand. However—you are good enough to offer me assistance, and I cannot afford to dispense with it, as matters stand. It is a very serious matter, M. Verney, and—and——" she hesitated.

"Don't tell me a thing more than you think advisable, Mademoiselle. Just tell me what you want done, and I will do it to the best of my power."

"It is not that. I could not let you help me unless you understood the whole matter. But—yes—I am afraid I must confess, or you will think I speak too freely to a stranger—a comparative stranger——"

"Let us say a new friend."

"I thank you. Do you know why I went across to Ligerz this afternoon?"

"To work off the annoyance I had caused you?"

"Something very much more to the point. In this matter I am nothing. All my thoughts are for another. Annoyance, trouble, suffering for myself are of no account. No!—Don't be angry with me, M. Verney! It seemed to me that, in default of the help that was promised me but which had failed me, I might have to fall back on the assistance you offered. I did not know you or anything about you. But you had given me your name and standing. I went across to Ligerz and telegraphed to the Countess d'Auriac in Paris asking if she knew you, and if I could place implicit confidence in you in a matter of very grave importance. You are not angry with me?"

"On the contrary, Mademoiselle. You did just what I would probably have done myself under the circumstances," and he wondered more than ever what the circumstances could be which called for such precaution.

"Then now we know how we stand, and I will tell you. You served for a time in Petersburg——"



"A couple of years."

"Did you ever meet General Pesthel?"

"I have met him, but I had no acquaintance with him."

"You know the kind of man he was."

"I have heard."

"He was the wickedest man ever made"—and the sweet voice was charged with feeling so intense that it became little better than a hiss. "He was base, cruel, heartless. Why are such men allowed . . . Some men are not men, they are fiends, and he was one"—and Verney began to get a glimmering idea of what might be coming. He had heard a good deal about Pesthel, and remembered his sudden end.

"We are Beresovs of Viborg"—she stopped, and he could see her eyes gleaming at him out of the darkness of her hood. He nodded with partial understanding, and would have begged her to spare herself the painful story, but she stayed him with that imperious little gesture which would take no denial.

"I want your help. You must hear. Pesthel wanted my sister Darya. She detested him. He pursued her. She fled, and he vented his spite on those who were left. My father died in prison, innocent of any wrong. You know how easily wickedness in high places can manage a little thing like that in Russia. My mother died broken-hearted. My brother is in Siberia. My aunt, whom you met at dinner, took me under her wing. She is the Princess Galtzine, but here she has always been known only as the Countess di Garda. Darya waited her chance. She was driven half crazy with it all. She shot Pesthel at Geneva—you remember!"

"He deserved it," said the young man quietly.

"Surely! He deserved a hundred such deaths. One was small punishment for all the ill he had wrought. Well—Darya was condemned to perpetual imprisonment. She



is here in the prison at Ste. Julienne. It must be killing her. Our beautiful Darya behind prison-bars! Why it almost kills me even to think of it. For more than a year I have been working to get her free. We exhausted every legitimate method, but the authorities dare not let her go. Then, at last, we got into touch with one of the women warders through one of our people. If Darya gets clear the woman will be rich for life, for my aunt has plenty; and the money is nothing, but Darya is everything to us both. But we needed assistance to get her of. A girl cannot do everything. The Countess d'Auriac is one of my aunt's oldest friends. We confided in her, for she knows and loves Darya, and she promised to provide the assistance we sought. He was to have arrived yesterday or to-day. When I saw you I took you for the M. Bertel whom the Countess was sending. Now, you understand it all?"

"I understand and sympathise deeply, Mademoiselle——"

"And you will still help us?"

"To the very last ounce that is in me!"

"I thank you!" and a little white hand shot out impulsively towards him. He took it gently in his, and bent and kissed it.

"You have never told me your own name," he said.

"I am Sonia—Sonia Mikhailovna. But I am nothing. It is Darya we have to think of."

"How is she to get out of the prison? It is for Friday night, I remember. You told me in the wood."

"The warder is to arrange that. She will lose her place, of course, but that will not matter to her. She is to get Darya out just before midnight on Friday. We are to have a boat waiting for her over there, below Jolimont—the rest we have to provide for."



"And what are your ideas? Let us consider the matter in all its bearings."

"They will not discover that she has gone before the morning. We shall have eight hours in which to get away. They will telegraph to the police in all the large towns, so we must get across country by unknown ways."

"Where is it your idea to get to?"

"To England eventually, of course, and they will guess that." The back of Verney's brain suggested to him that even Britain might be no safe asylum for Darya, if she were discovered there and her extradition claimed, but he would not have hinted it for the world.

"We cannot cross the Jura, for they will be on the lookout there. I think we must get through to Italy or Savoy. But first we will go to Unterhofen, for you see——"

"Exactly where is Unterhofen—so that I may follow out your ideas?"

"Unterhofen? On the Thuner See—over there!" and the small white hand pointed over his shoulder towards the south-east. "It is a not-much-frequented country that lies between—plains and rivers and hills, and we must keep away from the roads and use the bridle-paths, and that is why I want a man's help. I do not know what the difficulties may be, but we have got to surmount them."

"And Unterhofen, when we get there?"

"Then we shall be all right, for a time at all events, and, you see, Darya may need a little time to pull round. I hardly dare to think what effect two years of prison may have had on her."

"And at Unterhofen? I just want to get everything clear in my mind. Why do you feel so certain of being all safe there? Might they not——"

"I go too quick. I forgot you did not know all that. My aunt has taken the Château there for six months. We have had it often before. She is fortunately known there



also only as the Countess di Garda. Because, you see, if Darya Beresov escape, and her aunt the Princess Galtzine was at Unterhofen that is the very first place they would look for her."

"That is well thought of."

"It is a very curious old place, right on the water. You can get to it by boat and no one in the village know anything about it. She has her own old servants there, and we can trust them completely."

"I see. And all that is, I think, quite feasible. I don't see any reason why we can't manage it all right."

"It is so good to hear you say so. A word of hope is very comforting, and it is so good to have some one to help. A girl alone feels so useless."

"I think you have done splendidly. Now you must let me take the burden off your hands. Have you made any further plans for Friday night?"

"My aunt and I leave here to-morrow, ostensibly for Paris. But she will go by Bienne to Bern and Unterhofen, and I shall wait at Twann, just across there, to be ready to go to meet Darya on Friday night. I shall want you to pick me up there at such time as we may arrange, and then we will go and find Darya, and before the morning we must be far away among the hills, without leaving any trace of the way we have gone."

"We'll do it. What time do you start to-morrow?"

"After breakfast—dinner, as they call it here—about three o'clock."

"I shall have the chance of another word or two with you when I have thought out my own plans?"

"I think the less we are seen together by the people here the better. There may be inquiries made, you see. . . . But . . . you remember the place where I first met you?"

"I shall never forget it."



"There is a path runs to the left by the side of the island wall. If you go along it you will come to a break in the wall where a narrow path runs through the new young trees towards the lake. If you follow it you will come to a seat by the lake side. It is my favourite seat, for it looks out towards Darya. I will go there by another way first thing after early breakfast."

"I will be there. Do you know the country between here and Unterhofen?"

"I don't know it at all, but in any case we must avoid the roads as much as possible."

"I must get hold of a large-scale map, if I can. And—yes—I see lots of things to be thought out. A boat to go down to Jolimont in for your sister, and then to make it vanish, or it might furnish a clue. Disguises of some kind for you both. Have you thought that out at all?"

"I thought of getting a dress of some kind for Darya, of course."

"I think we must go further than that. However, I'll think it all out and make notes of everything, and give you my ideas in the morning."

"You are very good to take so much trouble for a stranger."

"Don't call me that! Your confidence in me has made me feel like an old friend."

"I thank you with all my heart. Now, please take me in."

"Do you know the way? It's as dark as pitch to me since the moon went in."

"Straight ahead. I will tell you when we are near."



## CHAPTER V

### PLANNING THE VENTURE

VERNEY spent half the night, with quite novel enjoyment, planning to its smallest detail all that had to be done, so far as he could foresee it.

More than once he heard some one moving about in the next room, for several bedrooms thereabouts had been made out of one large apartment, though, by the state of the panelling, he judged it was very many years before. And once he heard the window quietly opened wide, as his own was, and so he judged that Mademoiselle was as little inclined for sleep as himself.

Six o'clock next morning found him pulling merrily across the lake through swathes of low-lying mist towards Ligerz on the western shore, just as the men of the farm were turning out with their scythes and a great ox-wagon to cut fresh grass for the cows in the stalls. They gave him "*Guten Morgen!*" and stood looking after him, and wondering audibly why any man who could stop in his bed should want to be up and about at that time of day.

He found rowing through the mist an odd sensation. He could see nothing ten feet beyond the boat, and felt as if he were travelling through a cloud. However, he knew the village lay straight across from the island, so he steered as best he could by his own wake, and trusted to luck to get there some time.

When at last his long prow ran up a rough shore, he jumped out and stood hesitating which way to turn. He



decided on the left, and pushed on till he came to the village.

The postmaster was up and doing. Verney handed him a telegram of which even his peasant curiosity could make neither head nor tail, and went cheerfully back to find his boat.

The sun was well up before he was under way again, and the mist was thinning and rolling up from the lake, though it still clung tenaciously among the vineyards along the hill sides.

Halfway across he stripped and plunged in and found the water bracingly cold. He rowed himself dry and warm, and presently astonished the little maid, Marthe, by the rosiness of his complexion and his appetite for hot coffee and crisp rolls and honey.

She said, in the kitchen, "The Englishman has had nothing to eat for three weeks, and yet I thought he made a good supper. And his face! it is like the sun coming up through the mist." But then she did not know how he had been enjoying himself all night, and how much he had done that morning.

When he had finished astonishing Marthe he strolled up the hill behind the house, retraced his steps of yesterday, found the tree of trees from behind which Mademoiselle had burst upon him, recalled her every word and look, and then went on down the slope and along the wall, till he came to the breach and the footpath.

He found the seat looking out over the lake towards Darya, and lit a cigar, and waited, more than satisfied with all that lay before him.

The sun shone brilliantly now, and sprinkled the mirror of the lake with glancing ripples. The young trees all about him were draped in a thousand tender tones of green and orange and brown. The hill of Jolimont still looked



all sombre green, and the red roofs of Erlach glowed again among their vineyards like poppies in the corn.

Across the lake, where he had been that morning, a school-bell was ringing mellowly, and he could hear the voices of the children at play.

Then a dry stick snapped in the underwood behind him, and Mademoiselle came quickly along the narrow path.

"You were surely out very early," was her greeting. "I thought you were perhaps going for a bathe, but you were away too long for that."

"Yes, I went to send off a telegram. Some time to-night I shall get another recalling me at once to Paris"—she looked quickly at him—"I shall leave to-morrow morning"—she looked startled and anxious—"and shall go up to Bienne. They will find the telegram on my table after I am gone, and that will account for me all right. You will be accounted for because you will have left with Mme. di Garda. So if inquiries are made as to any suspicious characters who may have been loitering in the neighbourhood lately, we, at all events, ought to pass unsuspected."

"You gave me a fright for a moment."

"And I have been treasuring the thought that you trusted me implicitly," he said reproachfully.

"Oh, I do, I do. But I suppose I am getting nervous as the time draws near. I could not sleep for thinking of a hundred things that might miscarry and spoil everything."

"I'll see that nothing miscarries if only your wardress comes up to time."

"You give me hope again, and make me feel strong."

"Now here is what I have been thinking. We want a boat, and when we've done with it, it must be sunk. We cannot hire one and destroy it. We don't want to steal one. I shall buy a second-hand one at Bienne, then we can do what we like with it. That's one item settled. Next



—now, please don't revolt at this!—If you will consider it for a moment I think you will see I am right. Your sister must have a disguise of some kind. If a hue and cry is sent round, all the country will be on the look-out for a young lady who has escaped from Ste. Julienne. My suggestion is that no young ladies at all try to make their way from here to Unterhofen, but that a young professor with two of his pupils might very well do so without exciting the slightest comment."

"You mean?" she said, with a glance that was half doubt and half amusement, and yet all quick comprehension.

"Exactly! That you two should be dressed as boys. In every way you would find it an advantage. I will see to it all—with those big round-about cloaks slung round you——"

"If there are cloaks——" she murmured, with a delicious colour in her face and dancing lights in her eyes. And then: "What about our hair? Darya's came down to her knees. You won't want us to cut it off?"

"Good heavens, no! You can coil it up on top, and the hats I will get you—those soft cloth things, you know—will hide it completely. I will get two complete rigs and *rucksacs*, and sticks, and stout shoes. What size?"

"Three!" she gasped, at this business-like inquisition.

"Darya the same? Here, let me measure," and he pulled out a piece of string and bent down to her foot and knotted the cord.

"I will also get the best map obtainable of the country between here and Unterhofen, and, oh well, there are heaps of other little details, but I don't need to trouble you with them."

"Nothing very——" she began.

"Nothing at all outrageous, I assure you. The only other thing is where I am to find you to-morrow night, and



what time? I shall row down from Bienne in the boat—and bring my parcels with me,” he said with a smile. “I can pick you up wherever and whenever you please.”

“I shall go up to Bienne with my aunt, and we rest there to-night. I shall come back to Twann to-morrow and spend the time up the Twannberg, so that I may not be noticed loitering about the village. If you can be off Twann landing-place at ten o’clock we can pull quietly down the lake and talk over any further arrangements.”

“Will you get supper, or shall I bring some provisions?”

“I will get supper, up at the Kurhaus, but it might be well to bring something. We might be glad of it early in the morning.”

“I will see to it all.”

“Will you . . . will you let me provide the money, M. Verney?” she asked hesitatingly.

“Please don’t trouble about that. I never enjoyed spending money so much in all my life before.”

“You are very, very good to me,” she said quietly, “and it is a great load off my heart to have your help.”



## CHAPTER VI

### EN GARÇON

**N**O one on the island would have imagined, from the very formal expressions of regret with which the Englishman received the news at dinner, that Madame and Mademoiselle were leaving that very afternoon, that there existed between them anything but the most casual acquaintance.

“*Herr gott!*” said Marthe in the kitchen. “They are cold-bloods, those Englishmen, though you wouldn’t think it to look at their faces. To think that he could sit opposite to her at table for two whole meals and feel not the slightest sorrow at her going so soon. However, he’ll feel the difference when she’s not here—at least he would if he were not a cold-blooded Englishman.”

But, to Marthe’s great disappointment—both on her own account, because she liked the look of the Englishman, in spite of his healthy appetite and cold blood; and on his account, in that he deserved to suffer for his insensibility to Mademoiselle’s beauty, for which reason she placed him at supper opposite the ugliest stout old lady in the company—that very evening there came a boy from Ligerz in a boat with a telegram for M. Verney, at which he expressed the greatest annoyance and disappointment, and presently it leaked out that he was suddenly recalled to Paris on affairs of importance.

And Marthe knew that was so, because she found the telegram on his mantelpiece next morning after he left, and Fräulein Sophie, who could read English, had read it to her.



But if, to the watchful eye, the Englishman showed himself quite unworthy of Marthe's original solicitude in placing him opposite the most beautiful girl they had seen on St. Peter's for many a day, he himself found the island suddenly bare and desolate without her.

The company at supper that night struck him as unusually commonplace. The red-shaded lamps and bowls of roses were no longer adjuncts of fairyland, but the most ordinary of table decorations. Barri, the big St. Bernard, was a nuisance with his pressing attentions. Yesterday—ay, even this very morning—it was golden autumn, all aglow still with the warmth and joy of summer. Now it was autumn in very truth, with chill suggestions of coming winter.

The wind sang mournful cadences among the giant trees on the hill, and the golden-brown carpet of leaves in the long walk whispered sharp little forebodings, when he strolled along after supper to the great beech from behind which she had sprung upon him that first day.

That first day! Was it possible—he said to himself—that that first day was only yesterday? Was it possible?

Why, he seemed to have known her for a length of time that no ordinary measurement could span. He certainly knew her better than he knew people he had been meeting for years. And—yes—he could not conceal from himself that he would like to know her better still.

He rowed himself across to Ligerz next morning, with a boy from the farm to bring back the boat, and took the first train to Bienne. There he engaged a room for the day at the hotel near the station, explaining that he would be leaving again that same night. And then he went out shopping and enjoyed himself extensively.



He bought a full-sized *rucksack* and two smaller ones, and at the best outfitter's shop in the town he spent much time in the purchase of complete outfits for two mythical nephews at boarding-school in Morat. And, from the discriminating care with which those outfits were selected, the young gentlemen were evidently difficult to please and not easily suited.

However, the generous uncle made no trouble about prices so long as he got what he wanted, and the salesman judged him of a pleasant and genial disposition, and wondered now and again if it could be the cut of the clothes which caused those irrepressible little smiles to twitch in the corners of his mouth, as he worked through the items on his list.

At the shoemaker's, two pairs of stout little walking-shoes, size as per piece of knotted string, left the impression that the young gentlemen were not built on the same generous lines as their stalwart uncle, and were probably of delicate constitution, from the solicitude with which he attended to them being fitted with the softest inner soles procurable.

Two light six-foot climbing poles shod with iron spikes, the best large-scale maps of the district obtainable, a small lantern fitted with a spring-candle, and a supply of good cigars, completed the good uncle's purchases for the moment. But late in the afternoon, after an arduous course of map-study in his room, he strolled down to the boat-builder's yard near the bathing-place, and without undue bargaining became the owner of a very second-hand boat and a pair of light sculls, quite good enough, as he explained, for a pair of frolicsome youngsters living at Neuveville at the other end of the lake, whither he purposed taking it himself that same evening. And, in order to incommode the boat-builder as little as possible, he would



take it away at once and leave it in charge of a boatman on the Twann road till he was ready to start.

At the hotel he spent a busy hour packing his own *rücksac* with necessaries from his portmanteau, and dividing the boys' things into two complete sets, one of which he stowed away in the two smaller *rücksacs*, and the other he made into a parcel, which was not nearly as neatly finished off as the shopman would have done it.

After supper he settled his small account, left his portmanteau in charge of the landlord until he should send for it, got a small boy to assist him with his parcels, and soon after nine o'clock was sculling quietly down the lake towards Twann.

The village was mostly asleep as he pulled slowly past it, only an occasional light suggesting watchers by bed-sides or the modest joviality of the café. He had left the last house behind, and was considering the advisability of turning, when a soft whistle along the road, like the cheep of a disturbed bird, drew him that way, and presently he made out a small dark figure on the white rocks of the shore. He ran the overhanging prow inshore. Mademoiselle stepped lightly on board, and he turned and pulled out into the lake.

"All well?" he asked.

"All well! Have you managed everything you wanted?"

"Everything—to the last shoe-lace."

"And you got those cloaks?" with a touch of anxiety.

"You are sitting on them. Now, I have been thinking. When your sister comes, every moment will be of consequence. May I suggest that you should change into a boy before we meet her? Then you can——"

"But where—how?" with a breathless little catch in her voice.

"I thought you might think of some place—or I could put you ashore on St. Peter's, by that favourite seat of



yours. I have brought a small lantern, so that you can see what you are doing. And as soon as your sister comes you can help her, you see."

"Wait! Let me think!"—and presently—"if you will pull down towards Neuveville there are some nice-looking little arbours and summer-houses overhanging the water. Perhaps one of those would do—if we can get inside."

"First-rate! We'll get inside all right!" and he pulled along towards Neuveville, skirting close to the shore.

"This will do," said Mademoiselle, as a massive little stone-built house, trellised with creepers and overhung by weeping willows, loomed up before them.

He ran alongside the stone steps and climbed up into the arbour to investigate.

"All right. Nice and dry, and the door is closed on that side. Couldn't be better."

He handed her ashore, and passed up the larger parcel, and the lamp and matches.

"Think you can manage? I'll pull off a bit along the shore. Whistle if you need me. And don't forget to bring the lamp away with you. Your sister will need it."

"What shall I do with my own things?" she asked somewhat nervously, and with an almost irrepressible desire to break into laughter.

"I'm afraid we must sacrifice them. Wait a moment, and I'll bring you some big stones. Then make them into a tight bundle with the stones inside, and we'll drop them overboard as we go."

And so presently he was well out of sight down the lake, and whenever his eye rested on the distant tiny glow in the arbour, his mouth twitched humorously in the corners again, as he wondered if she would find any difficulty in the details of her transformation.

It seemed to him an incredibly long time before she summoned him.



"Got the lamp?" he asked, as the little cloak-muffled figure appeared on the steps.

"Here."

"And your other things?"

"Here," and Verney would dearly have liked to keep the bundle she handed him.

"And you're sure you have left nothing lying about?"

"Quite sure. I looked carefully all round," and she stepped lightly into the boat and he pulled away.

"You are quite sure you have had some supper?" he asked lightly, to cover her natural confusion.

"Quite sure, thank you."

"And you found everything you needed? You managed all right?"

"I think so," she murmured, with that hysterical desire towards laughter again, and drew the other cloak protectingly over her knees.

He would have rejoiced in a moon, so that he could see how she looked as a boy. But the moon had gone down, and for their enterprise it was better so.

All he could see was the loom of the little round hat pushed well back on her head, and of the slim cloaked figure huddled up on the back seat.

"I hope the shoes are comfortable, and everything else to your liking. For cross-country work comfortable shoes are of the first importance."

"They feel clumsy at present, but they are quite easy. I shall get used to them. What will you do with the boat?"

"Sink it when we've done with it. And these things"—handling the heavy bundle of her clothes—"it seems like desecration to throw them into the water, but I don't see how we could carry them."

"What nonsense! I've got plenty more at Unterhofen. Drop them overboard at once, please," and reluctantly he



let them slip down into the darkness below, and pulled on in silence.

"It is very very good of you to do so much for me, Mr. Verney. . . . I'm afraid I am very selfish in the matter."

"Not a bit of it. It's just splendid of you to let me help you."

"I have been thinking all day up on the Twannberg there. Supposing we should be caught, it might be very unpleasant for you. It might ruin you——"

"But we're not going to be caught, and the very remote prospect of consequences does not trouble me in the slightest, I assure you. We shall get through all right, you'll see, and you will be happy all your life in having done so good a deed."

"Oh, I hope so! I hope so! . . . I could never have done it all alone."



## CHAPTER VII

### OUT OF THE CAGE

A SILENCE fell upon them as they drew near to the time and place upon which their hopes were centred.

Mademoiselle was gripping the sides of the boat so tightly that her fingers felt like bits of bent wood. Her heart was jumping uncomfortably up towards her throat and felt like to choke her. And even Verney's heart was pounding in a quite unusual fashion as he felt at last the current of the Thielle flowing in from the lake of Neuchâtel, and he turned at once and pulled up the stream.

Suppose Darya was not there! Suppose something had gone wrong! Suppose—he ground his teeth on foolish suppositions and pulled slowly on, soundless as a shadow, with his eyes boring into the darkneses of the right-hand bank.

A choke—something between a sob and a gasp—from Mademoiselle, and a pull of the oar swung them in under the bank. And surely, he thought, it was the eye of love that discerned them there, for he could see no sign of them till they touched the land.

Then a light figure, swathed in darkness, stepped into the boat, right into Mademoiselle's arms, it seemed to him, and lay there for a moment while two overcharged hearts panted for utterance.

But the success of her mission braced Sonia to the needs of the moment. She placed her sister gently in the stern, and turned again to the second dark figure on the river bank.



"Our most grateful thanks!" Verney heard her whisper. "Here is the money. You will get away?"

"They will never see me again, Fräulein. You may make yourself certain of that."

"Adieu, then! And all safety to you!"

"And to you both, Fräuleine!"

"Now, please!" she whispered urgently to Verney, and he bent to his oars and sent the light boat speeding up the river towards the Neuenburger See.

Dark as it was, and imperatively necessary for him to keep his head over both shoulders at once in order to meet the turnings of the river, he was still fully conscious of all that passed just in front of him.

Darya, the newcomer, had dropped her face into her hands, and the strain of who shall say what fearful hours and days and weeks, of intense anticipation of this moment, was surging out in sobs that shook the boat. Sonia, with wisdom born of love, clasped her arms about her, and drew her close, and let her overcharged heart have play.

Verney's strong arms swung like pistons, and presently the banks fell away and they were skimming the easier waters of the lake.

The lights away down there on the right, were Neuchâtel, and he edged off and pulled with long eager strokes across towards the opposite shore.

An hour's steady rowing and Neuchâtel lights lay right opposite them on the other side of the lake, and his passengers had come to something of equanimity and the eager exchange of whispers. He turned and pulled shorewards, passed some feeble lights which he judged must be in houses in Cudrefin, and then, at last, pulled into the denser darkness. The boat grated on stones, and the voyage was over.

"Now, Mademoiselle," he said to Sonia, "if you two will slip in among the undergrowth there and transform



Mademoiselle your sister into a boy, I will see to the rest."

He handed them out of the boat, and loaded himself with *rucksacs* and sticks and the tiny lamp.

"I will leave everything with you here"—when he had found a suitable nook, about a hundred yards inland. "When you've done, wait here till I come. I shall have to swim back after sinking the boat."

"You'll catch your death of cold," shivered Sonia.

"Not a bit of it. A swim will be bracing after the rowing, and I've got a towel here. Think you can manage? Make up your sister's things into a bundle with stones inside, and see you tie it very tight."

He lit the lamp for them and disappeared into the darkness, and they listened till his footsteps died away in the direction of the lake.

"Who is he?" asked Darya.

"A young Englishman, who turned up by chance in the nick of time when Mme. d'Auriac's promised assistant failed me. The Countess knows him and speaks for him. He has been very good."

"Does he know——"

"I have told him—all that was necessary," said Sonia quickly. "Now, dear, come! You have got to be changed into a boy and we have no time to lose."

"How did you manage? Did he help you?" with a hysterical desire to laugh and shout and scream.

"No, of course not. He left me in a summer-house by Neuveville and rowed away till I was ready. I had to wrestle with the things myself, and I'm not sure now that I've got them on right. Fortunately there are big cloaks——"

Verney found it no easy matter to charge his boat with such a load of rocks as would ensure its permanent settlement under water. He rasped his hands and bruised his shins as he stumbled about in the darkness, till at last he



thought he had enough. Then he stripped quickly and pulled slowly out to deep water, rammed the butt of his oar through the thin planking, waited till the boat sank under him with nothing more than a soft gurgling, and struck out for the shore with the sculls under one arm. He rubbed himself into a glow, dressed quickly, and wondered whether the boys were ready. In the distance, the glow of the tiny lamp, with Sonia standing between him and it, was no more than a soft blur on the darkness.

He spent a few minutes in breaking up the sculls and shoving the pieces out of sight in the thickets, and then whistled tentatively, and received Sonia's signal cheep in reply.

"All right?" he asked, as he came to them. "Things fit?"

"Quite all right," said Sonia, but before he had time to satisfy himself, the lamp was suddenly extinguished.

"If you will give me that bundle I will fling it out into the lake, and then I think our traces will be covered," and he went off again with Darya's things.

"He is very good," said Darya, as they waited in the darkness.

"Yes, he is very good," replied Sonia.

He had some difficulty in finding them again, the darkness of the thickets was so intense, but an occasional whistle and reply eventually brought them together, and he put on his big *rucksack*—and would have taken theirs also but they would not have it—and struck straight on through the tangle, away from the lake.

"We shall strike a road presently and it will be easier," he said. "We will take advantage of it till daylight and keep our eyes open for travellers. There's not likely to be any one about so early as this, and we must get as far away as possible. We'll take to the hills as soon as we can."



"Now," he said, when they had come out upon the road, and could attend to anything but their feet, "you"—turning to Sonia—"will be—what will you be?—Louis, Fritz, Heinrich? No, stay, I think we'd better be English. Does Mademoiselle speak English?"

"Oh, yes," said Darya, and her voice was like Sonia's, but less full and fluty.

"Then we're three mad Englishmen, and anything odd in our conduct or appearance will be set down to the national idiosyncracies. So you'd better be Pat"—to Sonia—"and you, Mademoiselle—you shall be Jack. They're both my own names, you see. I've got a heap of names. And I'll be your Uncle Charles, and we're on a tramp through the Oberland. So—*Vive la Liberté and à bas Madame Grundy!*"

"It is very, very good to be free!" said Jack with feeling. "You don't know—oh, you cannot possibly know—what it is to be free till you've been behind the bars. Do you think they will follow us, Mr.—Uncle Charles—I mean?"

"We have a good start. They won't have the slightest idea which way we've gone. And I think it quite likely they will raise no hue and cry about the matter—for their own sakes. They will probably send word to every police-station, with a description of you, and tell them to keep a sharp look-out, especially along the frontiers. I suppose they'll get nothing out of that woman?"

"They won't find her very easily. She was going right away and will easily lose herself."

"Who is Mme. Grundy?" asked Pat, "and why *à bas* with her?"

"Mme. Grundy is the personification of the *comme-il-faut*, the social embodiment of all the things that ought to be done, and the scandalised reprover of all the things that ought not to be done. Mme. Grundy would most



strongly disapprove of everything we are bent on doing—of your costumes, of my presence with you.”

“Then down with her by all means, for if you weren’t here we would none of us be here, and Darya——”

“Jack!”

“Jack, I mean, would still be in—over yonder.”

“If Mme. Grundy were a real power I would never have been over yonder,” said Jack soberly.

“Were they hard to you? Were they harsh?” asked Pat anxiously.

“No, they were not. In their way they were even kind. But bars are bars, and no one knows how they crush and break, until they have been inside them. Oh, it is good to be free!” she cried, flinging out her arms from under her cloak as though to gather freedom into a wide embrace. “To be able to walk on and on for ever instead of round and round. I wouldn’t care if I died to-day, now that I have tasted freedom once more.”

“But we will hope you’ll live to enjoy it for many a year,” said Verney heartily, and felt himself amply repaid for all his labours, in her vehement gladness.

She told them, disjointedly, of her prison life, and found so obvious a delight in being able to talk, in the same way as she could walk, on and on without restraint, that they would not check her. It was all part of her first deep draught of freedom, for in prison you cannot talk as you would, any more than you can walk on and on for ever.

She had no tales of oppression or ill-usage to tell, but behind all her talk they could feel the grim shadow of the bars, and every now and again she would take a full deep breath of delight that the bars were no longer there.

They walked steadily for close on three hours, until the road took a sudden turn to the south, and in all that time they never set eyes on a human being. Then, as



dawn began to soften the eastern grayness, Jack began to limp a little wearily.

"I'm not used to so much walking," she said deprecatingly, "but oh, don't let us stop, please!"

"An hour's rest," said the Good Uncle autocratically, "and something to eat, and we'll all feel the better for it. I wanted to get done with this road before the daylight came."

So they struck off from the road and found a nook in a clump of trees, and he produced divine sandwiches made of long rolls, well-buttered, with meat inside, and a bottle of wine, with aluminum fold-up cups to drink it out of, and they divested themselves, somewhat shyly, of their cloaks and sat on them, for the dew was heavy even under the trees.

They did their best to appear unconsciously at ease in their unwonted garments, and he did his best not to trouble them with undue observation. But they were eminently good to look upon, truly a most attractive couple of boys, slight and slim, and endowed, to his thinking at all events, with graces quite beyond the compassing of ordinary boys, though, for the time being, just a trifle incommoded by the size of their shoes, and their unwonted display of stout, rough stockings.

It was well for him that he was smoking when he noticed Pat's violet eyes fixed intently on his own stockinged leg, and saw her, after a reasonable interval, turn away and readjust her own in keeping with it, and then quietly tackle Jack's.

"Pat, my boy," he suggested, with a twinkle, "so many rings on a boy's hand are not good form. Suppose you put them in your pocket. You've got lots of pockets now, you know," and she blushing stripped her slim white fingers and pouched her ornaments.

"You must try and get those hands a bit browned, too,"



he said, regretfully. "They're much too white for boys' hands."

"I'll dirty them," and she picked up a piece of earth and obscured their too attractive cleanliness.

"Mine will pass all right for boys' hands," said Jack quietly, and there was just a touch of sadness for them all in the thought of how they came so. "You see we had to do certain things in there, clean out our rooms and so on, and one could not wash too often."

"They'll soon come right again," said Pat consolingly, "and anyway it saves you the trouble of dirtying them now."

"How wonderful it is!" sighed Jack, as they sat in the freshness of the morning, and the soft white mist began to rise to greet the sun and swathed them in filmy folds, "I have seen the dawn come almost every day"—and her eyes were heavy with the recollection of the long, slow nights which only broke to longer, slower days—the unutterable weariness of the days and nights behind the bars—"but this is different—oh, so different! As different as life is from death. Then," with a deep grateful sigh, "there was nothing to look forward to but endless days and nights all just the same. Now . . . I can never, never thank you for getting me out," and she looked earnestly from one to the other of them.

"It's all Pat's doing," said Verney hastily, for there was an unspeakable pathos in her eyes—very like Sonia's, he thought, but full-charged with sadness—which touched his heart. "She's the head and heart of the matter. I'm only the trusty right hand, and that only by her Excellency's most gracious favour," and Pat shot a quick searching look at him, which he took as a reproof for his flippancy.

"Forgive me!" he said hastily. "It is just as well we



should keep on the lighter plane. Remember, we are mad Englishmen!"

"I am very grateful to you both," said Jack again. "Do you really think I can get clear away, Mr. Verney?"

"Of course we can. We've made an excellent start, anyway. Here's how we're going"—and to divert their thoughts, he pulled out his map, and traced their route by hill-paths and bridle-roads to the western shore of the Thuner See. "Then we'll get a boat, and I'll land you in the boat-house of the Château without a soul in Unterhofen knowing a thing about it. And there you'll have a good long rest, and then we'll take the road again and go, I think, by Frutigen and Kandersteg and the Gemmi, down into the Rhone Valley, and then, if we think well, cross one of the passes into Piedmont, or into Savoy. We shall have to be guided by circumstances to some extent."

"It is so good to have something to look forward to, something to hope for," said Darya. "It is better to be hunted outside with always the hope of escape, even though it killed one in a week, than to lie safe behind the bars for ever. Oh, yes! Even if they caught me now I would be glad to have had this bit of freedom. I could live on it for years."

"I hope you will live on it all the rest of your life, free and happy, and may it be a long one!" said Verney. "Now let us put the past behind us and think no more of it all."

"The thought of it makes the present all the brighter."

"Whereabouts are we, Mr. Verney? What is that little town with the pillar away over there?" asked Pat.

"That's Avenches," he pointed to the map. "We're somewhere about here, and we go straight on across to Unterhofen!"

"It looks a terrible long way. How long will it take?"

"That depends on how your strength holds out, but we certainly can't do it in one day. It's about thirty-five



miles from where we sit, I reckon, but we'll probably not be able to go quite as straight as that line I've drawn on the map."

"And where shall we stop the night?"

"I'm not sure till we get there. I propose to walk on all day, resting whenever you feel tired, and when we can't go any further we must look out for a place to put up at. If we haven't too many détours to make we might perhaps get as far as Noirburg here. Then we should be in Unterhofen to-morrow evening."

"Is there an hotel at Noirburg?" asked Pat, thoughtfully.

"More than one, according to Baedeker."

"How are we going to manage if we go to an hotel?"

"Why—how do you mean?"

"Well, you see, we can't very well wear our hats at table. I'm inclined to think we'd better cut it all off and have done with it."

"Not a hair of it!" he said, so warmly that Jack regarded him with a touch of wonder, and then let her eyes dwell thoughtfully on Pat. "There is no need. I've thought of all that. Remember, we are crazy Englishmen. We arrive late. You go up to your rooms at once. You are over-tired with walking—that will be true enough, I expect. You have your supper sent up to you, and eat it, like mad Englishmen, with the windows wide open and your hats on. Breakfast the same! How will that do?"

"We might manage it that way," she mused. "They'll only think we're a bit crazier than usual."

"It's so late in the season that there will probably be no one but ourselves anywhere."

"It's the hotel people we've got to think about. They all talk so."

"We must all talk English and be unable to understand any other language. That will let us through all right."



Now, if you're rested we'll get on," and they shouldered their packs and set off with new vigour.

I doubt if any of them had ever found such enjoyment in walking before. It was, you must remember, a glorious late autumn morning. The sun was brilliant but not too warm. The dewdrops twinkled under their feet with the radiance of all the jewels in the world. All about them was the sweetness and freshness of the new day, and in them all the feeling of a newer day still. From far and near the long quavering notes of deep-toned cow-bells sounded in their ears like ceaseless and urgent invitations to prayer.

Now and again they came to streams tumbling noisily along the middles of stony beds a hundred times too wide for them, but the chaos of rocks and boulders, which helped them across dry-foot, told tales of what those streams could do when the melting snows came down in the early summer. And at times they wound upwards and got glimpses of the massive green and grey slopes of the Niesen and Stockhorn in front, and, further away, of the snowy heights of the Blümlissalp, and away beyond them of the serene majesty of the Jungfrau and Monch and Eiger.

They passed through long green valleys dotted with chalets and rough wooden cowsheds, and through pastures merry with the tinkle and babble of running waters and glowing at times with swathes of purple crocus. And there, a cow-boy on a distant slope yodelled blithely to his fellows down below, and here, a string of children trotting to school carolled as sweetly as an angel-choir.

To Darya, new-freed from walls and bars, it was like a foretaste of heaven. She had no words, for her heart was like to burst with the joy of it all. Her eyes were softly bright and brimming whenever Verney looked at her. He knew that if he spoke to her she must break into passionate weeping.



And Sonia, too, was glad beyond words, for all her hopes were realised. All had gone well, and Darya was free.

As for Verney himself—put yourself in his shoes if you can, and try to imagine how he felt about it all.

At times, when he looked at Sonia, he had to pinch himself severely in order to bring home to himself the fact, the most astounding fact, the only-with-extremest-difficulty-to-be-realised fact, that this was only Saturday, and he had first made her acquaintance on Wednesday.

It passed belief. And yet there was Sonia—a new Sonia, indeed, in some aspects, and if possible even more delightful than the one whose acquaintance he had made so strangely and so stormily behind the big beech-tree on St. Peter's-insel; and here was he, ready to fall on his knees at any moment and kiss the shoe-string of this four-days-before-absolutely-unknown but now all-heart-enthralling maiden.

He marvelled—then he looked again at Sonia and wasted no more time in useless wonder.

With hearts so full they spoke but little, but walked, and stopped to gaze and listen, and walked again, and feasted their hearts in their various ways.

Till Jack began to limp again, and Uncle Charles's quick eye, on the look-out for symptoms of the kind, noted it at once, and called an immediate halt.

"No good overdoing it," he said cheerily. "Greatest mistake in the world to get blisters the very first day. I could perhaps carry one of you," looking at the slim, tired figures with a merry eye, "but I doubt if I could manage both of you at once."

"We will walk," said Pat with emphasis.

"But first we will rest," said Verney. "And when we get to the hotel you will bathe your feet in warm water and bran, and then anoint them with cognac, and in the morning you will both of you soap your stockings well inside."



“Bran? What is bran?” asked Pat. “And why put cognac on one’s feet? And how and why soap one’s stockings? I have never done any of these things before.”

“Bran—*die Kleie*,—the inner husk of the corn. You will find it very soothing to tired feet. The cognac will cheer them up. The soap rubbed well over the stocking inside will keep away blisters to-morrow.”

“We can try it any way, and truly my feet are not over happy.”

From his Pandora-box of a *rucksac* he produced another bottle of wine, and the fold-up cups, and still more sandwich-rolls of a quite fresh variety of inside furnishing, and cakes and grapes, and they made a very hearty meal.

“And now,” he said lazily, as he lit a cigar, “if you’ll take my advice you will both lie down and have a nap. We none of us got any rest last night and it tells upon one. You will find me under yonder tree, and you’ll probably have to kick me for five minutes before I come to life again. I’m as sleepy as a dog. *Au revoir*, and *dormez bien*, Mesdemoiselles!” and he strolled away to his tree, a hundred yards away, and lay down and smoked for a few minutes, and then fell fast asleep, and his cigar fell from his fingers and cremated itself into a beautiful white ash by his side, and when Pat came to waken him she thought it was a long grey snail.



## CHAPTER VII

### SPREAD WINGS

THEY crossed many stony streams, climbed in and out of many soft green valleys, and strolled into the little town of Noirburg, just as the lights began to twinkle behind the flower-laden balconies and creeper-covered galleries of its velvet-brown wooden houses.

"The *Bear* or the *Lion*?" said Verney, as they passed first the one and then the other. "Which shall it be? Both seem equally modest and equally unprepared for visitors."

The season was over, and neither house offered any ostentatious show of hospitality. There was a light, however, in the ground floor of the *Bear*, behind a screen of small fir-trees in green tubs.

"The *Bear* will be the older. Let us try that," said Pat.

"All right. Don't forget we're crazy Englishmen and understand no German," and they turned in under the sign of a rampant little black carnivore, and found themselves in the café of the establishment.

At sight of a couple of stalwart blue policemen sitting at a table, the girls would have drawn back, but Verney marched in and they had to follow.

It was not until they had reached the kitchen at the back that the stout little landlady came bustling to meet them, astonished at visitors so late in the day and in the year.

"We want two rooms and three beds," said Verney in good plain English.



"*Bitte?*" said the landlady with a wide, comprehensive, but uncomprehending stare.

"Two rooms——" and he held up two fingers. "Three beds," and he held up three fingers.

"Ah, three beds," as she caught at the familiar word.

"Yaw!" said Verney. "One, two, three beds."

From the broken torrent of ejaculations she poured forth he gathered that three beds, at that time of year, and her without servants, seeing that she dismissed them all as soon as the season was over, was something of a problem. But his face showed no sign of understanding, and she turned and led the way upstairs.

"That's all right," he said heartily, as she opened the doors of three rooms and turned on the electric lights. "That is, if you'll make up the beds properly," and he demonstrated his meaning by pulling depreciatively at the temporary covering.

"*Oh, ja, ja!*" laughed the little woman.

"And now we want supper."

"*Suppe allein?* (Soup only?)" she asked wonderingly.

"Everything you've got, and wine and coffee," and he opened his mouth wide to show how hungry they were. "And as quickly as you like, and we'll take it up here."

"Soup—wine—coffee—here," she caught at such words as held some meaning for her, then shook her head bewilderedly. "Why can't people speak what one can understand?" she murmured, and trotted away downstairs.

She came back presently with an ancient little German-English dictionary, which she thrust into Verney's hand, with the satisfied air of one who had encountered that same difficulty many times before and knew just how to get round it.

"Ah—good!" he said, and told her first, by aid of the book, that she was a clever woman, and then, word by word, made clear their further requirements.



The only thing to which she took any exception was their having their supper upstairs, and she explained again with such volubility, that she was short-handed and could not be running up and down stairs all night—to all of which they had to present as stolid and uncomprehending faces as they could assume—that at last Verney turned to the girls and said, “We’d better do as she wants, I think, and you must keep your hats on all the same. She’ll only take it as another sign of our barbarous lack of understanding,” and they submitted and followed her downstairs.

She led them, however, to a little *salon* made by covering in the side gallery of the house, and as there was a good deal of the conservatory about it, their hats and even their cloaks were not out of order.

“Now,” said Verney, assiduously consulting the dictionary, “*Geschwinde, schnell, gewandt, rasch, lebendig, regsam*——”

“*Ah—ja—ja—ja—ja—ja!*” gurgled the landlady, with her hands to her ears, and rolled away to her kitchen, where they heard her describing them and their stupidities, with gusts of laughter, to some one who punctuated her recital with sonorous “*So’s*.”

In due course, however, she served them with a very good supper, and was put into high good humour by the wine Verney ordered, and in fact was so doubtful whether he had correctly noted its price that she drew his attention to it with a fat forefinger, and was visibly impressed by his non-chalant, “*Yaw, yaw.*”

More than once during the meal a stout kitchen-fire-faced man in a white flat cap peeped round the door at them, and after each such occasion the comments in the kitchen broke out again.

“But why do they wear their hats all the time, then?”—they heard one time.



And the sonorous one replied, "Some kinds of Englishmen do so. They wear them in their churches and even in their Reichstag, and their King never takes off his hat at all."

"They are barbarians over there! Thank God we Swiss are not like that! Even the Germans take off their hats to eat."

"So long as they drink champagne at twelve francs fifty—and pay for it," he added as an afterthought, "they may sleep in their hats, and in their boots, too, if they like."

"*Herr gott!* Not in their boots"—and, after a thoughtful silence—"if they don't put their boots outside I will knock and say I want to clean them. It would make such a mess of the beds if they slept in their boots."

But while this first meal was not without its humours, neither was it lacking in its touches of pathos.

For Verney's laughing eye happening to catch Darya's accidentally one time, at some point in the kitchen discussion, he was surprised to see hers swimming with tears, and the drops rolling down her thin cheeks unheeded.

He looked away quickly and would have taken no notice, but it was Darya herself who presently said very quietly—

"It is strange, you see, to eat with a knife and fork again. It brings it all back."

"Why, you don't mean to say——" began Sonia in a fierce whisper.

"For a year I have had nothing but a spoon to eat with," she said quietly. "I lost heart about a year ago, and grew very hopeless and despondent. . . . Perhaps if I had had a knife I should one day have killed myself. And they thought so too, and so they took it away"—and Sonia's pretty face was warped with pity and anger at thought of all she had suffered.

"You must never let them put me back there," she said



to Sonia. "I would very much sooner die. Oh, very much sooner, after tasting what it is to be alive again."

"No, you shall never go back there," said Sonia fiercely. "I would sooner think of you dead, dear, much sooner! We will die together if need be."

It was odd to sit there and hear them discussing such possibilities, and Verney set himself to tune their thoughts to a lighter strain.

"You need not have the slightest fear," he said weightily. "You are well out of their hands, and we will keep you so. Now, if you will be good boys, you shall each have a cigarette with your coffee, if you like, and then we'll tackle Madame about the bran. She'll probably think Englishmen always drink a couple of quarts of bran and hot water when they go to bed, and she'll have a fit."

So when Madame came in with their coffee, and he had insisted on her changing the kirsch she brought for cognac fine, he ordered also a packet of cigarettes, and then, by the aid of the dictionary, requested bran, and greatly enjoyed her amazement.

"But——" she cried, repeating the words after him, in the evident belief that he had got hold of the wrong ones—"Die Kleie—Kleien! Now what in heaven's name——"

"For our feet," said Verney, solemnly, turning the pages quickly.

"For your feet!" she cried, in her own tongue. "Bran! for your feet!"

"With hot water," Verney evoked from the book, and laid it down in front of her and pointed out the printed words: "*Die Kleie, Kleien, wasser, het*"—and wished to finish the order with "presently—upstairs." But the little book had no word for "upstairs," and so he made it "presently—in bed"—at which Madame threw up her hands with an amazed "Oh, my goodness! What kind of not-to-



be-comprehended mind-distracting people are these?" and went off to consult with the sonorous one, who let off volleys of "*So's*" and "*Jawohl's*" at the recital, and turned it over in his mind, and questioned her explicitly, and finally said, "Nevertheless, since they drink champagne at twelve francs fifty—and, after all, bran is cheap and they will pay for it at a profitable price."

"This is the first cigarette I have smoked for two years," said Darya again presently, and much more cheerfully. "We used to smoke at home, of course. But you——" to Verney. "The women do not smoke in England, do they?"

"Oh, some do."

"And do you like to see women smoke?"

"As a rule, no. But circumstances may alter cases. You have been accustomed to it, I know. And besides you are boys, and boys will be boys all the world over," and truly there seemed no incongruity in the thin blue wreaths that curled about the shapely faces, on which the various anxieties of the day had left their traces.

"I don't see why tobacco should not be as soothing to women's nerves as to men's," said Sonia disputatiously. "Besides, they are usually credited with more troublesome nerves than men, and so should require it more."

"Sauce for the gander, sauce for the goose. All the same, a woman in evening dress, smoking, never appeals to me—not even in Russia."

"You have been in Russia?" asked Darya quickly.

"Oh, yes, I was there for nearly two years—in Petersburg."

"And you do not mind seeing us smoke? Why is that?"

"On the contrary! It must surely be because I see you are enjoying it and not doing it simply out of bravado. Besides—you are boys, you know, at present."

"One misses it much at first, when one has been accustomed to it," said Darya thoughtfully. "But it is surpris-



ing what you can do without when you have to. . . .  
There is only one thing you can never get reconciled to—stone walls and iron bars;—one thing you never cease to long for—liberty. Till the longing becomes an obsession. And when you have outworn that longing life is not much worth.”

“Try to forget it all, dearest,” said Sonia with deep feeling.

“Forget it, child? . . . Would to God I could!”

“One cannot always forget, but one can make up one’s mind not to dwell upon the sad things of life,” began Verney didactically.

“And the more you make up your mind not to, the more you do,” said Darya, and he knew there was truth in her words.

“Well, I propose an early turn-in to-night and an early turn-out to-morrow morning. After the day’s exertions, and no rest last night, you ought to sleep like tops. So now we’ll see to the bran and hot water. Put your feet in it for ten minutes or so. Then dry them and bathe them with a little cognac—take the bottle up with you. And in the morning turn your stockings inside out and soap the feet well all over, especially the sole. You will find the benefit of it during the day. I think you’ll find everything you need in your *rucksacs*. To-morrow night you will sleep at Unterhofen.



## CHAPTER IX

### ONLY A HAIRPIN

“**T**HEY are strange, not-to-be-understood, and full-of-their-own-queer-notions people, those English,” said the stout little landlady, as she stood with her arms akimbo, gazing after the departing travellers next morning.

“*Jawohl!*” said her husband, peering over her shoulder, with his white cap like a halo on the back of his head. “I would have more of them, since they drink champagne at twelve francs fifty, and pay for it. And for me, they can have all the cognac they want in their bedrooms, and bran and hot water by the bucket-full to drink or otherwise, so long as they pay for it. There was profit on that bran—yes, indeed!”

“They have had rolls and butter and honey enough for five, and they can be at Plaffeyen in two, three hours, and can eat again there if they are hungry, and yet they have taken bread and sausage enough to live on for two days, to say nothing of another bottle of champagne——”

“At twelve francs fifty—and paid for.”

“I always regarded the Germans as big eaters, but, *mein Gott*, they are nothing to these Englishmen!”

And the landlady rubbed her nose meditatively with the rounded top of a little silvered hair-pin, which she had found below the dressing-table of Sonia’s room, and wondered if English boys as a rule used such things—and how—and why.

The night’s rest had done them all good. The weariness



had gone out of their limbs, and even the girls' feet had recovered and were fit again. Unterhofen was before them—something under twenty miles away indeed, but still the next stopping-place; the morning air was deliciously crisp and inspiring; and the clanging of the deep-toned cow-bells, the silvery tinkling of the goats' bells, and, for a time, the more ordered pealing of many church bells, floated mellowly along the hillsides, and filled the valleys with music, and rang in their ears like pæns of victory at difficulties overcome and dangers successfully avoided.

Sonia's spirits effervesced in dancing steps and snatches of song.

Darya paced along more sedately, every step and every breath a tribute of gratitude for this mighty gift of freedom. She spoke very little, for her heart was like to burst with these new deep draughts of the life that had in it no bars, no dreadful walls, no inflexible rules and regulations—nothing but thoughtful consideration and tenderest care. And at times the swelling hills on either side, and the great benignant white peaks beyond, swam mistily before her as the grateful tears welled up, again and again, at thought of it all—of the two dreadful years she had spent in the whitewashed tomb, and of this wonderful resurrection from the dead.

They kept the high road to Plaffeyen as far as the middle of the great curve, and never met a soul the whole way except one old man leading four wilful goats to pasture. Then, where the road, after a long sweep to the east, turns back to the west before dropping down into Plaffeyen, they shook off its dust and took a footpath that led, by way of Reiffenmatt and the Langeneywald, towards Gurnigel.

And that was why the blue policeman retains to this day such an exalted idea of the pedestrian prowess of Englishmen.



He came into the *Bear* to pass the time of day with the Herr Proprietor and Madame, and found them full to overflowing concerning Englishmen and their strange wants and ways.

By reason of the Herr Proprietor and Madame both talking at once, and enlarging on some things and omitting others, he gathered, and still believes, that the very newest English custom is to drink a couple of quarts or more of bran mixed with hot water and cognac before retiring to rest. Putting two and two together later on, he was inclined to attribute their wonderful walking powers to this uncommon mixture.

"Yes, they were odd enough without a doubt, wearing their hats night and day, and all that, but they drank at twelve francs fifty—and paid without a word, and so the more we get of them the better, say I," said the Herr Proprietor. "What's that you've got there?" as he caught the gleam of the unmanly little implement with which Madame was thoughtfully rubbing the side of her nose.

"I found it in one of the young Herr's bedrooms."

"*Gott*, but they are strange people, those English! Why, it's a hairpin!"

"A hairpin, without doubt," confirmed the blue policeman weightily.

"I expect all the young Herren in England wear them," said Madame. "They were as delicate-looking as girls, both of them."

And from that overlooked hairpin of Sonia's we may fairly hang all that followed.

The blue policeman experienced a very natural regret that he had not had the opportunity of closer personal observation of the ways of these unusual travellers. And as business led him to Plaffeyen, he determined to catch them up and see for himself.



He set off after them at a good quick pace, and walked for an hour without sighting them.

The only person he saw, in all that time, was a very old man wandering round a field after four lively goats.

"Seen three travellers pass this way?" shouted the policeman.

"Yes, yes—on in front."

And the policeman quickened his pace, but never caught up with his quarry.

It was the following day before he heard any word of the escape of a prisoner from Ste. Julienne.

And then the escaped prisoner was a girl, and a Russian girl at that, and these things did not directly suggest, to his somewhat slow official mind, any connection with three on-foot-travelling Englishmen.

Then he remembered that hairpin, and revolving it in his mind, it scratched a vague possibility thereon, and after due consideration, he ventured to speak of it to his superior officer. He, scenting possibilities for himself in the matter, made light of it—dexterously, and by way of showing his subordinate how foolish his suspicions were, acquired all the information he possessed—and quietly set to work to follow it up on his own account.

It was only Verney's precautions in the matter of bathed feet and soaped stockings that carried the unaccustomed travellers through that long and arduous second day's march.

Darya especially, fresh from the cramping effects of two years of stone walls and iron bars, discovered before long how weak the flesh may prove in spite of an indomitable spirit.

The bravely-smiling face with which she greeted Verney's earlier suggestions as to resting, misled him somewhat as to her physical powers. She urged them on and



on, and would not hear of stopping. For behind her was the prison-house, and in front was liberty.

Sonia stepped with a spring, and carolled snatches of the yodel-songs the children sang as they went to school. And Charles Verney had nothing but joy in his heart at having been permitted to help her in this great undertaking, and at the sight and sound of her happiness.

They stopped, and ate and drank and rested, at times, in spite of Darya's urgency, but she was always the first to be up and anxious for the road again.

It was a lovely country they walked through, heading straight for the Stockhorn and taking any path that served, and, if none offered, making one.

Avoiding everything in the nature of a village, even though it lengthened their journey somewhat to do so, and fighting shy even of single chalets when it was possible to avoid them, they encountered very few people, and those mostly only cow-boys singing merrily to their unresponsive charges, or very ancient men and women wandering vacuously after lively tinkling goats. And this it was that gave the blue policeman's superior so much trouble when he tried to trace them a few days later.

The sun was almost level with them in the west as they climbed one of the lower flanks of the Stockhorn, and saw the lake of Thun gleaming and darkling below them.

"How far?" gasped Darya, sinking down on a mossy rock, and Verney saw by her strained face and tightened lips that her strength was about exhausted.

"Less than three miles, I should say," he said cheerfully.

She shook her head wearily. "I doubt if I can do it."

"We'll have a good long rest, and a smoke, and you will please drink this," pouring out a dose of cognac from his flask. "And we will go slowly, and not get down to the lake till it is dark, and you shall hang on to us both, and if necessary we'll carry you between us. Now which is



Unterhofen?" to Sonia, who was kneeling by her sister, full of pity and concern.

"Right across there with the flashing windows. That to the right is Gunten. That is the château right on the lake-side. Oh, I wish we were there!"

"We'll be there all right presently. Where can we get a boat, do you suppose?"

"Einigen is nearest. And they have boats there, I know. I have often rowed across. You see that thin little spire, like a needle. That's the old church."

The sight of the château across the water, and all that it meant of comfort and relief, heartened Darya somewhat, but when, after a lengthened rest, she got up and insisted on going on, it was evident that she had outwalked her strength and was almost in a state of collapse.

He made her cling to his arm, and Sonia took her other arm, and so, slowly and heavily, they stumbled down-hill towards the lake. It was the most trying bit of the journey. Never had miles seemed made of so many steps. Darya did her best, but at times she hung so limply between them that they feared she had fainted, and then Verney would stop and try to administer more cognac, and she would gasp, "No, no! Get on, get on!"

When they came to the Kander, rushing noisily over a wide bed of grey stones, it was too dark for the girls to attempt the crossing. So Verney rolled up his trousers, and, regardless of boots and stockings, carried them over in turn and rejoiced in the service. Indeed, the joy of having Sonia cradled in his arms, and clutching spasmodically at him as he stumbled over the slippery stones, was such that he would willingly have gone on carrying her across stony rivers all night long.

"I won't let you drop," he laughed quietly one time, at a more fearful clutch than usual.

"You might fall," she gasped.



"Then we'd at all events go down together. But we're not going down."

"We cannot thank you for all you are doing for us, Mr. Verney," she murmured.

"I'm enjoying it tremendously, I assure you," and he felt his way cautiously across, regardless of bruises down below, and regretful only at the shortness of the journey.

The lights were twinkling in the few scattered houses of Einigen as they crossed the railway line, and came down to the lake side.

"Now, shall we take French leave with a boat, or shall we hire one?" he whispered, as they passed, between two houses down to a tiny beach where several boats were drawn up.

"The less we are seen the better," said Sonia. "The trouble is—yes, here is one with oars. They generally take them away at night."

"Get in, then, and we'll chance it," and they stepped in. He shoved the boat quietly out and laid hold of the pinned oars.

They were not fifty yards out when the door of one of the houses opened, and in the broad shaft of light two men came down to the beach, and after an outburst of surprised ejaculation at the disappearance of their boat, broke into furious objurgation and counter-accusation of stupidity in not tying it up properly.

"That's all right," laughed Verney, as they swept along under his long steady strokes. "I'll take their boat back as soon as I've landed you. I suppose there are boats at the Château."

"Oh, yes, proper boats," said Sonia. "Not like this."

"I'll take one and tow this tub back and leave it where we found it. Am I going right? Keep me straight for the Château."

"All right," and she peered into the dimness in front,



while Darya sat, silent and weary, but with who knows what of tumult in her heart at the thought that all her troubles were over, and here at last she was within touch of safety, and her own people again.

"A little to the left," ordered Sonia. "We're going towards Gunten."

"Your left or mine?"

"My left—more up this way."

"That's port a bit. To the right is starboard," and after that she gave him his directions in correct nautical terms.

And presently they were running straight for a denser patch of darkness on the shadowy shore, which proved to be the trees and garden of the Château, and creeping warily along the lake wall they stole up to the boat-house.

"Thank God!" said Sonia fervently. "And they've left the door unfastened for us," and they nosed cautiously in. "Now, Dolly, dear! Mind the steps, they're always slippery. Why, she's asleep! . . . Oh, Dolly, what's wrong, dear?"

"You hold the boat as steady as you can, and I'll lift her out. It's been too much for her, I'm afraid. Now—so! That's all right! I'll carry her up to the house. Better twist that rope round something to make sure. Now, if you'll lead on, Mademoiselle.

Sonia led the way swiftly under the trees to the house, and he followed with Darya in his arms, her long hair floating round him like a veil.

They came round to a modern French window where there was a light, and Sonia tapped on it, evoking an ejaculation of surprise from within. Then Madame di Garda's anxious white face peered out at them, and in a moment she had them all in her arms, so to speak.

She embraced Sonia, and almost looked like doing the



same with Verney, but her dismay at sight of Darya's condition intervened.

"I think she's just over-done," he said. "A drop of cognac, perhaps," and Madame flew to a sideboard, and poured out a glassful with trembling hand.

"The poor child! My poor little Dolinka! What she has suffered!" she murmured, as Verney laid his light burden on a sofa, and Sonia dropped a little of the cognac between her pale lips and dabbed some on her forehead.

Darya opened her heavy eyes and blinked wonderingly on them all, and then put up her hands to her hair.

"Auntie! Auntie!" she cried, lifting her arms, and Madame fell on her knees beside her and wept joyously over her.

"I'll take that boat back at once," whispered Verney to Sonia.

"Must you?—to-night? You must be nearly dead."

"Not a bit of it. It's best to make a clean sweep of the matter at once, and leave no traces."

"I wish you had not to go," she said, with a knitting of the pretty brows. "Are you sure you can find the way?"

"I'll manage all right, somehow."

"Wait! You shall take M. Joannot. He often goes out in the boat, and he couldn't lose himself."

"Who is M. Joannot?"

"He's aunt's *chef*, and a dear old thing. He's a bit deaf at times, but his eyes are good and he can row."

"If we can trust him——"

"Absolutely. He's been with her twenty years and more. Darya and I have known him all our lives. There is nothing he would not do for us."

"Then by all means, M. Joannot, and the sooner we're off the better."

"I'll go and get him," and she slipped away.

Darya was lying quietly back in a pile of cushions



which Madame di Garda had heaped about her in her anxiety to make up, as far as was in her power, for all her past discomforts.

She smiled wanly across at Verney.

"I don't know how we're ever going to thank you, Mr. Verney," she said very gratefully. "We never could have managed it all alone."

"Mr. Verney has earned our undying gratitude," said Madame fervently.

"I don't know when I ever enjoyed anything so much before," he assured them. "I'm only sorry you're suffering from it. But, you see, we had to get along as quickly as we possibly could."

"I shall be all right after a good rest. I've not been used to much exertion lately. Will it be all right here, aunt? Your people——"

"Not one but would give their right hand for you, dear. You need have no fears. Now we've got you we'll guard you like a precious jewel."

Sonia came back, followed by a portly man, dressed in immaculate white, clean-shaven and close-cropped, whose face conveyed, by its dried-up lack of colour, an unmistakable impression of hot fires and cookery. It was a good honest face, however, and was, at the moment, all alight with joy and amazement at the news he had just heard.

At sight of Darya he went straight to the couch, and bent and kissed her hand, murmuring welcomes like an abnormal turtle-dove.

"There is a boat to take back to Einigen," said Sonia, in answer to Madame's surprise. "We borrowed it without asking leave, and Mr. Verney insists on returning it at once. M. Joannot will go with him to help."

M. Joannot bowed in most dignified fashion to Verney, at mention of his name, and inquired. "Monsieur speaks French?"



"Both French and German, M. Joannot, and I shall be very grateful for your assistance. As I don't know the lake well, Mademoiselle feared I might lose myself in the darkness."

"Monsieur will be perfectly safe in my hands, and rowing is my very great enjoyment."

"Then I think the sooner we go the better."

"If Monsieur will permit me just one moment. The wind is cold on the lake at night," and with a bow he sped away to change into less conspicuous clothing.

He was back in a miraculously short time, in fact Verney had barely drunk the half-tumbler of wine—which Madame with motherly care insisted on, and which tasted to him like a blend of port and burgundy and shot new vigour through his veins—when M. Joannot reappeared in more business-like raiment, with an official-looking peaked cap in his hand, and signified his preparedness.

"A glass of wine before you start, my good Joannot," said Madame. "It is a long course to Einigen and back in the dark."

"In one hour we should be back," said M. Joannot, with the air of one accustomed to the accurate allotment of his time. "Madame! Demoiselles! Monsieur!" he comprehended them all in a courtly bow as he drank, and then he and Verney hurried away to the boathouse.

Arrived there, M. Joannot lit a lantern which hung from the roof, and disclosed three boats hung in slings to keep them above the wash of the passing steamers.

"We will take this one," said M. Joannot. "It is my favourite. If Monsieur will insert the handle in the holes of the roller—so!—and lower when I do—so! Here are cushions. Wood is a hard seat. Here are the oars. Now we will attach the peasant boat by its painter. So! Now, *voyons!*" as they nosed out and he peered over his right shoulder into the darkness. "We will go straight across



and then work down the shore to Einigen," and they bent to their oars, and Verney found four oars several times better than two, when a clumsy, long-prowed peasant boat yawed stupidly astern.

"Monsieur has done a good work in bringing Mademoiselle back to us," said M. Joannot, when they had settled to their swing.

"I have been very glad to help, M. Joannot."

"And you have been careful to attract no attention, to leave no traces?"

"None, I think. We were very careful, and kept ourselves to ourselves as much as possible."

"That is good. One cannot be too careful in such a matter."

But they neither of them knew anything about that hair-pin of Sonia's.

"It is not, you know," continued M. Joannot presently, "that they very much wanted to keep her locked up there. No one thought any the worse of her for shooting that brute—that beast of a man—not a bit!—not the very smallest! But the Swiss are a small people, you see, and they have to be careful not to give any cause for offence among the bigger ones. And so—*eh bien—voilà!* When she has had a good rest and got her strength up again, we must get her away to England. For, after all, and in spite of its most detestable climate, England is the one land where one can be free and live in peace."

"You have been a long time with Madame, M. Joannot," said Verney, after a strenuous silence which had reduced the lights in the Château to mere pin points astern.

"Over twenty years, Monsieur. A long spell in one's life. But it is a good service. Madame is very rich and very generous, and not as *exigeante* as some I have known. She keeps her people. Not one in the Château but has been with her ten or fifteen years."



"So that, as regards Mademoiselle, they may be safely trusted? She is not yet out of danger, you understand. And I think it would break her heart if she were sent back to that place."

"Have no fear, Monsieur. Not one among us all but would give everything we possess sooner than harm should come to her. How long has Monsieur known her?"

"Two days," confessed Verney, with an involuntary smile.

"And the other—her sister?"

"Four days."

"*Voilà!* Monsieur has done all this for them—possibly at some risk to himself—and he has known them two and four days. And we—we have known them ten times as many years. Have no fears, Monsieur! They are quite safe with us," and they rowed on again in silence.

As they drew in towards the opposite shore, the hoarse voices of the Kander rushing over its stony delta into the lake fell on their ears, and M. Joannot edged off to the south.

"You know where you got the boat?" he asked in a whisper.

"It was from an open bit of beach the other side of the church. I think the house to the left of it was the last house along the shore."

"I know the place," and they crept silently along till he whispered again, "Here we are," and let his oars hang by their pins, and bent forward and untied the captive behind, and drew its prow alongside.

"Now pull in and we will shove it well ashore, and they will get it all right in the morning," and in another minute they were heading back for Unterhofen.

"They will think some of the villagers have been playing a trick with them," chuckled M. Joannot, "and they will probably quarrel furiously over it. But as well that



as anything, and since they did not see you they cannot suspect you," and he was evidently proud of his share in the successful little mission.

"I love this Thuner See," he broke out presently. "And when one stands much about a fire there is nothing so exhilarating as a row all by oneself on the lake. I take a pride in my work, you see, and, as Monsieur has doubtless learned in his experience of life, if one wants a thing done perfectly one must do it oneself."

"Undoubtedly."

"You see, Monsieur, I am artiste. I aim at perfection, as a true artiste always must. And it is as possible to be artiste in matters of the cuisine as in letters, or music, or painting."

"Assuredly!" consented Verney, smiling to himself in the dark once more. "In fact, I should say your profession makes a wider appeal even than the others, M. Joannot."

"Wider without doubt," said M. Joannot emphatically. "But whether higher I am sometimes in doubt. After all, men's heads are placed above their stomachs, anatomically at all events; though, *mon Dieu*, I have known some who were practically all stomach."

"Not a healthy state of things, that."

"*Mon Dieu*, no! That kind always suffers in the end. The appetite grows, you understand. It is like drugs—the craving becomes the master. For myself, I eat little and I drink little, but what I do take, of the best, *bien entendu*, and so my mind is always clear and in condition for its finest work. . . . And I have found this Thuner See a veritable inspiration at times. Just at sunset on a fine autumn evening it is as though one rowed with a couple of big spoons on a lake of iridescent jelly—colours of the most wonderful; and the Niesen, over there, powdered perhaps with new fallen snow, resembles to a



degree the exquisite pyramidal spice-pudding which I have had the honour of naming after it."

"You are a happy man, M. Joannot—to be in love with your work and to possess a free hand."

"Monsieur speaks feelingly. May I express the hope that he is not less happily situated. To be unhappy in one's life work——"

"Oh, I mustn't grumble. But the diplomatic service palls at times by reason of its forced inaction and hideous waste of time. It is possible even to get tired of looking perpetually pleasant and doing nothing. That is why it is such a mighty joy to have found something really useful to do these last few days."

"I know, I know. I was not *chef* at the French Embassy in Vienna for close on ten years for nothing, Monsieur. Even a *chef*, with intelligence and an inquiring mind, learns something of the under-currents. There is always such talk down below, you understand."

And presently, thanks to M. Joannot's intimate acquaintance with the lake, they ran into the boathouse, and Verney went up to the Château, bodily very tired, but heartily exultant at the success of all his exertions.



## CHAPTER X

### ONLY FOUR DAYS

**I** HAVE sent them both away to bed, M. Verney," said Madame, as she welcomed him back.

"Quite right!" he said heartily, though, all the way across the lake and back, he had been hoping for another sight of Sonia. "A good long rest is just what they are needing. I hope Mlle. Darya was feeling better?"

"I made them both take a good supper and a hot bath, and now all they need is sleep, I think. But I was to take them word at once of your safe return. So, if you will be so good as to help yourself to all you want, I will tell them at once, and then their minds will be at rest and they will sleep. All went well?"

"Thanks to M. Joannot. We left the boat exactly where we found it, and never saw a soul."

"They will be anxious till they hear, so I will go at once. You will excuse me for just a moment or two."

He found a delicious little supper awaiting him, with a spirit lamp burning under the silver soup tureen, and his appetite needed no coaxing. He was making great play with cold chicken and ham and tongue, and a large and varied assortment of German sausage, when Madame returned.

"I do hope you find everything to your liking, M. Verney," and the kind old face was a lesson in anxious hospitality.

"I don't know when I enjoyed anything so much. How are the young ladies now, Madame?"



"They were only keeping awake to hear of your safe return. They begged me to thank you again and again for all you have done for them. And I join my own thanks to theirs. We are under the deepest obligation to you."

"Please don't say any more about it. If you only knew how delightful it has been to me to be of some little use in the matter, you would see that the obligation is all on my side. It has been so refreshing to have a real object in life—and so delightful a one."

"It is very good of you to regard it so. You think she will be quite safe here, for a time, at all events?"

"I am certain no one can trace us here, and you have perfect confidence in your people, I believe. No one about who will drop an incautious word outside?"

"I can trust all my people. They are all old and tried servants, and they have known the girls since they were children."

"Then I should think your mind may be perfectly at rest, for the time being at all events. Of course it would be safer that she should get right away out of Switzerland. That, I think, is the idea, is it not?"

"Yes, I think she should get out of Switzerland—to England if possible. But she must have a few days' complete rest. The long confinement has told upon her sadly. Such a splendid girl she was, and now!" and her expressive sigh told more than her words. . . . "Please smoke, M. Verney. I will make your coffee myself."

"You are sure you don't object?"

"On the contrary. It recalls only fragrant memories," and she busied herself with a little silver *cafetière* suspended over another spirit-lamp.

"We must hope that freedom and your good care will soon restore Mlle. Darya to perfect health," said Verney, as he contentedly lit a cigar. "I am sure she deserves a happy time to make up for the past."



Madame shook her head sadly, as she handed him the coffee, and picked up a piece of knitting she was at. "It is grievous what sorrow the wickedness of one evil man can make. Your very great kindness does something to restore one's faith in mankind. No,"—as he waved away any further reference to the matter with a deprecating gesture. "It is no light thing you have done for us. And as to the risk to yourself—I doubt if you have fully considered it or even given it a thought."

"I assure you it is not worth speaking of."

"If you had been caught it would probably have ruined your career."

"Oh, well—it wouldn't have mattered. It is terribly tedious at times, as you probably know, the life of the embassies—a negative kind of life at best. That is, until you arrive at the upper air, and have something really important to do."

"I know. We were in it for very many years until my husband died. All the same, I should have regretted it deeply if it had spoiled your life. Of course Sonia did not know—at first. And then—well, she was crazy to get her sister away from that place. They have always been very dear to one another. She would have sacrificed herself, or any one else, to carry it through."

"She did quite right. I consider myself an uncommonly lucky fellow to have turned up just at the right moment when I could be of some use in the world. And now, please do not say another word about it. Mlle. Darya is free, Mlle. Sonia is satisfied, and I am only too happy to have been of service in the matter."

The old lady looked across at him with more than a touch of thoughtful compunction in her kindly eyes, and went on with her knitting.

"I will show you to your room myself whenever you feel so inclined, M. Verney," she said, when his cigar drew to



an end. "And if you feel like having a hot bath, the bathroom is close at hand. There is nothing like a bath, to my mind, to take away fatigue."

"You are kindness itself, Madame, and with your permission I will go at once. These last few days have been fairly tiring."

And when he stretched himself enjoyably between the soft sheets he said to himself, "Is it possible I have known her only four days; only—four—days—only—?"



## CHAPTER XI

### DARK DOINGS

**V**ERNEY was wakened next morning by the sound of the sweetest singing he thought he had ever heard. And, jumping up, he found the sun high and the lake all a-ripple with dancing gold just under his window.

Right across the lake in front was the long tumbled pile of the Stockhorn, with its peak humping up into a cloudless blue sky, for all the world like a huge saurian basking in the sun, every fold and furrow of its wrinkled armour bare to the eye.

Below it, spread like a white fan upon the water's edge, he could see the stony delta of the Kander, and smiled happily to himself at thought of the delightful rôle of St. Christopher which it had entailed upon him the night before. And Sonia had feared he might drop her!

Further along to the left he could make out the scattered houses of Einigen, and wondered if the mystery of the boat was convulsing the little place out of its usual dull routine. Then his eye dwelt with vast enjoyment on the dark wooded hill which shelters Spiez, and on the mighty pyramid of the Niesen, just sprinkled with fresh white powder, like one of M. Joannot's spice-puddings.

And, in behind Niesen, that tumbled chaos of gleaming white peaks must, he thought, from what he had seen of it in their tramping, be the Blümlisalp, and rarely beautiful it looked in its fair white mantle of newly-fallen snow.



And all the time, as he gazed at the wonders in front, from just round the corner came that wonderful sweet singing which had mingled with his waking dreams.

He reconnoitred cautiously, then went to the bathroom and enjoyed a cold dip, and dressed, and went downstairs.

As the only other room he knew was the one where he had supped the previous night, he made his way to it, found the breakfast things on the table, and a cheerful fire of logs crackling and spitting on an open hearth, but no one about, so he stepped through the open window and strolled along the path under the trees by the lake-side.

It was a most exquisite morning, with a crisp touch of autumn in the air and every bush festooned with filmy lace all pearled with dew. The kind of morning that made the simple act of breathing an active enjoyment, and the mere fact of living a cause for liveliest rejoicing; and when to that was added the certainty of meeting Sonia within the next few minutes—Sonia, who yesterday was Pat and to-day would be her own charming self again—then a morning of mornings indeed, every moment most precious and to be made the very utmost of.

He looked into the boat-house, with lively memory of the previous night, and picked up Darya's tweed hat which had tumbled into a corner. Then he sauntered on till, at a bend in the path, he came suddenly on the sight of the giants of the Oberland, towering, white and wonderful, high into the sky over the southern end of the lake, and he stood transfixed and worshipful.

A light step behind him, and he turned and found Sonia.

"I've come to call you in to breakfast," she said. "I saw you go down this way."

He had wondered how she would meet him. Would she be just as in those last two delightful days—Pat?



Or would she be the Sonia of their second meeting? For the Sonia who sprang out at him from behind the beech-tree on St. Peter's-insel was no doubt a quite exceptional Sonia, but he was glad he had seen her so.

Or would she be an entirely new Sonia? For he was prepared to credit her, from the little he had seen, with a complexity of personality above the ordinary, even in women.

As it turned out it was, to an extent at all events, a new Sonia he encountered when he turned—an extremely self-possessed and very charmingly dressed Sonia—doubtless the two conditions correlate in some abstruse feminine fashion; a Sonia whose boyish abandon had left her along with her boyish garments; a Sonia with her hair done in long Oberland plaits, coiled round and setting off the shapely little head in an irresistibly delightful fashion; but withal a somewhat unnecessarily, as he thought, shy and restrained Sonia.

"It is the reaction," he said to himself. "But she cannot put off the remembrance of it all as easily as she has put off the garments."

"How is your sister? And did you both sleep well?" he asked, with his eyes upon her face for signs past and present.

"She is still very worn and tired, and I'm afraid we neither of us slept as well as we ought to have done. I know I was tramping endless hills, and crossing dark streams and black lakes all night long. It was a relief to wake up and find myself safe in my own room at Unterhofen."

"I am sorry. I'm afraid we hastened too much. Perhaps if we had taken another day to do it——"

"No, we did quite right. I don't think Darya could have stood another day. She is to stop in bed all to-day, and that I hope will bring her round all right."



"Indeed I hope so."

"You had no difficulty last night?"

"None at all. M. Joannot was invaluable. According to him, Einigen will now be quarrelling vigorously as to who runs away with boats at night. What a wonderful sight that is!" he said, turning to the giants again. "What do you call them?"

"The big one on the right is Jungfrau, then Mönch, then Eiger. That steeple with the two patches of snow on it, like two white doves, is the Finsteraarhorn."

"They are very wonderful."

"Yes, they are wonderful. I have known them half my life, but the wonder never palls. Shall we go in now? Auntie is waiting for us."

"Your sister's hat," he said, as she glanced at it in his hand. "Better keep it in case it should be needed again."

"I hope you, at all events, took full advantage of a comfortable bed, M. Verney," was Madame's greeting, as she met them at the window. "Our girls seem to have been too tired to sleep, or too excited. And for myself, I was thinking so many things that I too wasted my opportunities. And you?"

"I slept like a top. I'm afraid I'd be sleeping still but for some heavenly singing which woke me."

"The children in the school-house. Yes, they sing very sweetly. It is just behind us here. I like to hear them. Please help yourself to the honey. Do you like cheese in the morning? It is an Oberland custom. . . . More coffee? I hope you won't find it very dull here, M. Verney, for a day or two. You see——"

"Dull? No, indeed! There is enough to look at from that garden walk for months," he said heartily. "The man who could find himself dull in so lovely a place ought to be sunk in the lake with a big stone to his neck." To say nothing of the fact that was impressing itself more and



more upon him, that, for him, dullness could not possibly be where Sonia was. Even though she had suddenly become shy and reserved he had known her otherwise, and the shyness would wear off and she would be all her old self again.

"Well, for a few days at all events, I have been thinking it would be as well if none of you showed yourselves outside. I do not think any but our own people can know you are here, and it will, perhaps, be better so. Unterhofen is but a small place, you see, and in a small place tongues wag famously."

"I think you are quite right, Madame, and for myself, I assure you, confinement to the garden will be anything but a hardship. I think this is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been in.

"I am very fond of it. It is twenty years since I began coming here, and I love it each time better than the last. You could, of course, go out on the lake after dark, if the irrepressible British blood craves an outlet for its vigour," she said with a smile.

"The irrepressible British blood is very capable of adapting itself to its very charming circumstances," he laughed. "Pray do not trouble about me, Madame. I am perfectly happy, I assure you. I trust the rest will make Mlle. Darya quite all right again."

"I hope so," said Madame, thoughtfully, with a pucker of the usually placid brow. "It would be very awkward if we had to call in a doctor. But I think she is simply over-wrought. Rest and feeding will, I hope, set her on her feet again. She has gone through terrible trials, poor girl!"

Newspapers were brought in before they had finished breakfast, by a soberly-dressed, middle-aged serving-woman, who had evidently seized the opportunity of having a good look at Verney.

There was not a word in the papers concerning Darya,



and there had not been. The authorities were evidently keeping the matter dark, which seemed to Verney highest wisdom on their part. They would doubtless strain every effort to recover her, he thought, but if they failed there seemed no reason why matters should not rest where they were and none be the wiser.

Then Sonia disappeared upstairs to her sister; and Madame, after making him free of the rest of the house, and showing him where books were to be had, begged him to excuse her, and followed her; and Verney strolled away along the path by the lake to the bend, and resumed his acquaintance with the white giants of the Oberland.

And, filling his mind and heart, was the marvel of the fact that this was Monday, and it was only on Wednesday at midday, that he had first met Sonia Beresov; that five full days ago he was not even aware of her existence, and now——! Well now, he had to confess to himself that he was more interested in her than ever he had been in any girl before in all his life. And everything he had seen in her he approved and rejoiced in.

She was generous, warm-hearted, impulsive perhaps, but staunch and true, and undoubtedly clever and original, a splendid comrade, cheerful and spirited and fearless, and withal the most beautiful girl he had ever met.

Oh, he had plenty to think about. Was her heart engaged elsewhere, he wondered gloomily. He had seen no signs of it. But there—in five days one could not learn everything, and there was no way of learning.

It was risky, perhaps, allowing his heart and his thoughts to dwell upon her in this way, but he could not help himself. How could any man help himself under such circumstances?

He was devoutly thankful that he was the man subject to the trial. It would be unbearable to think of any other man——



She had been very frank and open with him. Still, if her heart were given elsewhere, she could hardly have proclaimed that fact to him. She had told him what she thought necessary, and for the rest he must trust her, as she had trusted him.

He must just dree his weird and hope for the best, hope that in this case at all events the gods were not dusting his eyes and leading him into paths that could only make for loss and bitterness hereafter.

And there, from the cloudless blue in front, the mighty white peaks, calm and serene and majestically aloof, looked down on all the strange and anxious little ways of man, and to a mind receptive and attuned, suggested deep, high thoughts of love and constancy, and, in short, of Sonia, and wove themselves into his heart along with a hundred delightful memories and thoughts of her.

Only five days!—he kept reminding himself. Only five days!—and yet she had become an essential part of his life, and all his future hopes revolved about her.

How was it possible that she could, in that short time, respond to the feeling that so stirred him? And yet, he said to himself exultantly, if it were possible in his case, why not in hers? For those five days had been surely quite exceptional days, and had broken down the barriers of convention, and drawn them together as five years of ordinary intercourse might not have done. In those five days she had trusted him completely, and he had come to love the ground she trod on.

“Well? And did you manage to pass the morning without boring yourself to death?” asked Madame, when they met again at second breakfast, which in those parts is termed dinner, the evening meal being supper.

“I sat looking at the Jungfrau and thinking about her. She is very wonderful.” But the actual “her” of his thoughts, in the person of the fair girl sitting opposite to



him, was more to him than all the most wonderful mountains in the world.

"Yes, Jungfrau is very satisfying," said Madame. "I also have spent many a delightful hour gazing at her. She is always wonderful, always beautiful."

"I am sure," said Verney, with conviction.

"And she never palls."

"Never."

"You speak as if you had known her all your life," said Sonia, with a smile at his earnestness.

"Indeed, I feel as if I had, though it is only five—I mean two or three—days, since I first set eyes on her. She seems somehow to fill a want in me—as though all my life up to now had lacked just what she alone could give."

"The embassies surely run to poetry," laughed Madame.

"No, it is the Jungfrau who has captured my young and impressionable heart. Henceforth I am her most devoted slave."

"Well, don't go trying to master her," said Madame quietly. "I have known some who have come to sad grief in the attempt"—and Verney's hyper-consciousness wondered briefly if the old lady's words held any hidden meaning for him.

But she continued: "I never could understand the craze for climbing. I think you Englishmen have it worse than any others. Why can't you be content to worship at a distance? I am sure one cannot get from the top such an overpowering sense of her beauty as one does from a distance—to say nothing of the chances of breaking one's neck or ending under a snowfall."

"I suppose it's largely just that feeling that there is something to be mastered. It does tempt one, you know. I felt it as I sat there. She seemed to look back at me with such calm contempt, as much as to say, "Hands off, Mr. Man! You couldn't do it if you tried." And a challenge



such as that always provokes one to the attempt. But we've got other things to think about just now. How is Mlle. Darya?"

"The rest is doing her much good. She begged me to thank you again and again——"

But he put up a warning finger. "We agreed, I think, to say no more about all that. I have been blaming myself for want of consideration for her in pressing on so fast, but——"

"If you had not got her here last night she might be lying spent somewhere else. She is very much better here, and you did quite right."

"It is very good of you to say so, and I will hope that she will soon get over the effects and bear me no ill-feeling."

"If you heard her talk you would have no fear of that," said Madame. . . . "I wonder if they will make any very rigorous search for her. I shall never feel she is safe till she is out of Switzerland. And that means that we must begin to consider the next step—that is, unless"—and she hesitated and looked anxiously across at him—"unless we are trespassing too much on your time, Mr. Verney."

"Oh, please don't think that. I would regret it all my life if you didn't let me see this through—right to the end."

"It is truly good of you. But it is much to ask—such comparative strangers as we are to you, and you have already done so much."

"Why, I feel as if I had known you all half my life. And besides——"

"Sonia was telling me that you came to Switzerland for a quiet holiday."

"I don't believe I was built to enjoy a quiet holiday, whereas this being of some use to somebody is delightfully refreshing and invigorating. It is worth a thousand mouldy quiet holidays," and Sonia smiled at his vehemence.



His afternoon was spent in the garden again—gazing at one Jungfrau and thinking much of another; teasing and feeding an insatiable swan which patrolled the nearer waters, with the eye of a tax-collector for anything that might be going, and an attendant multitude of small fishes who waxed fat on his leavings; enjoying the restful peace of the outlook, the lake, the mountains, the far-away, sleepy-looking little white villages; and wishing much that Mlle. Darya was all right again, so that Sonia could have no excuse for spending so much of her time with her.

“Selfish brute that I am!” he said to himself. “She has not seen her sister for two years. It is only natural they should want to be together now as much as possible. And I’m almost a stranger after all, though I don’t feel like one.”

He got out his maps and pored over them in search of the next step. He smoked many cigars. He tramped restlessly to and fro, with his bodily eyes absorbing all the beauties about him, and his mental eyes conjuring up visions of the sweet purposeful face, that had come, in these five short days, to stand for all that was good and beautiful and desirable in life.

He wished most ardently that they were back in the strenuous days that levelled barriers, and made, of delightful necessity, for closer intimacy and good fellowship.

But he could wait, for those times must come again before long. There was much still to be done before their hearts could be at ease concerning Darya, and if only she could recover strength sufficient for the occasion, the sooner they came the better he would be pleased.

Sonia’s sudden withdrawal within her shell of maiden modesty, as soon as they reached comparative safety, puzzled and amused and slightly provoked him, even though all his generous instincts argued constantly in her favour.



"What else could she have done?" asked Commonsense.

"Come out here to me and let me worship her," replied Earnest Desire.

"She has duties elsewhere, and first of all to her sister."

"All the same I want her."

"Pure selfishness on your part."

"Call it something else, and I'll agree."

"You have only known her five days."

"But five such days! The richest days of my life! Worth any other five years of it!"

"Does it strike you you are gone slightly crazy?"

"Yes—for Sonia! I glory in it."

And Sonia, you may be sure, knew all about it. For the way in which a man looks at *the* woman is quite different from the way in which he looks at any other woman, and *the* woman always knows it, no matter how imperturbable a manner the man may assume.

He looked forward with the greatest eagerness to meal-times, not because he was hungry for food but for Sonia, and at table it was his heart's hunger that he ministered to rather than his body's, though M. Joannot spent himself on the concoction of delicacies that might have made the mouth of a mummy water.

At supper, eager to anticipate a renewal of happiness even in thought, and since actual discussion of it gave it almost the consistency of fact, he gave them the results of his geographical studies concerning the next move.

"As far as I can see," he said, with his hopeful eyes on Sonia's face, "our best plan will be to row across to, say, Faulensee, just the other side of Spiez—then cross the hills into Kanderthal and work over the Gemmi to the Rhone Valley, and then, if we can, get through into Italy by one of the passes, the St. Bernard, or the Col de Fenêtre, or the Simplon."

"On foot?" asked Madame.



"I think it must be on foot, but we will make easy stages. There need not, I think, be the pressure there was at first. You see, we don't know at all what the authorities are doing, but we must, I think, credit them with the very simple idea of watching the regular main outlets, and we must avoid them."

"It is getting late for the passes," said Madame, with a touch of anxiety.

"Oh, we will take no risks, no unavoidable risks anyway. Taking things easily, we ought to have no difficulty in getting through all right, and we shall have time to pick and choose our way," and how devoutly he wished the time was come and they were on the road again—just he and Pat and Jack—and this altogether-too-retired-within-her-shell, but otherwise-entirely-charming, Sonia left behind at Unterhofen, a delightful but tantalising memory.

For, on the road, she felt herself dependent on him to some extent, and his feeling for her could find veiled expression in a thousand delicate little ministrations; and on the road, unless his previous experience should belie itself, her spirits would shake off the trammels which Unterhofen imposed upon them, and would sing and soar like a lark released from its cage.

And so there was meaning in the anxious "And how goes Mlle. Darya?" with which he always greeted Madame and Sonia, and renewal of hope in their repeated assurances that the rest was doing her good and she was pulling up splendidly.

"A week's rest and good feeding would set her up completely," said Madame, with a questioning glance at him.

Seven whole days, with nothing more than these intermittent glimpses of Sonia on the other side of the table, seemed a terrible long time to him, in spite of the fact that he had lived nearly four times as many years quite



unaware of her existence. But he stifled his anguish and made bold to answer cheerfully—

“I see no reason why she should not have a full week. It would be a pity to take the road again until she feels quite able for it.”

“I’m afraid you will find the garden grown very small before the week is up,” smiled Madame a little anxiously.

“Not a bit, I assure you. It is altogether charming. And as soon as it is dark enough I will go for a row to keep myself fit.”

And perhaps it was a fear that, in spite of his brave assumption of contentment, over-much loneliness might prove too much for a young man who obviously craved companionship, that sent a slim cloaked figure stealing down the path to the boat-house, when the grinding of the ropes on the rollers announced that he was lowering the boat. But, again, perhaps it was Madame who sent her.

The expectation of anything so good had been so very far from him that he almost tumbled backwards into the water, when he turned to get the oars and his eyes fell on her in the meagre light of the lantern.

“Peter’s-insel!” he jerked expletively—from which one might possibly draw an inference as to where his thoughts had been at the moment of interruption. “What a start you gave me, Mademoiselle! Coming for a row?”—still somewhat off his base and incredulous of such unexpected and quite overwhelming happiness.

“May I?”

Might she? Think of it—might she? Might she set his lively young heart thumping within him like a triumphant little drum, and send the red blood dancing through his veins like sparkling wine of Asti? Might she fill the darkness—inside and outside and generally all round—with such a radiance that it seemed incredible that it should



excite no remark from possible observers along the lake-side? Might she lift him from the shadows of the boat-house and his vain longings, which he had been going to work off into the water through the oars, into a seventh heaven of delight?

"Step in!" was all he said, after a moment's play with cushions, of which he piled up enough to make a nest for her in the stern, and held out his hand. And they nosed out of the boat-house and swung away into the outer darkness, and Verney wondered again that their going excited no commotion along the shore.

"This is very delightful of you," he said presently. "It is quite like old times."


"Old times of—what is it—five days ago?" she said with an amused laugh.

"I keep saying that to myself, but it seems incredible. It conveys no meaning to me. Circumstances alter cases, you see, and I suppose, under certain circumstances, five days could hold as much for one as five years," which was capable of various interpretations, and she was not slow to adopt her own.

"I don't suppose any five years of your life have been so full of worry and annoyance as these five days since I flew out at you from behind that tree on St. Peter's-insel."

"Worry? Annoyance? I don't know the words, and I think I shall make a yearly pilgrimage to St. Peter's, just to see that that tree is kept in good order."

He would have liked to drop his oars and just kneel forward, and take her hands, and say, "Sonia, can't you see? You are *the* woman! Every bit of you, from the lovely coils of your hair down to the dainty slipper peeping from under your cloak, which I can see in spite of the darkness, is dear to me—calls to me as nothing in life has ever done before."





But a modicum of common-sense was left to him, and he said to himself, "Five days! Five days! Too soon! Too soon! I must wait and make more sure. For her to have captivated me is nothing, for she is beautiful beyond compare. But what am I, that I should expect anything from her in return? In a moment of necessity she accepted my help, and she has thanked me more than enough. It is much to have earned her thanks and her friendship. If I go too fast I may spoil all."

He had dropped his head and tightened his lips, as he reasoned with himself against his inclination, and sent the overplus of his feelings into his oars and pulled with dogged vigour.

A startled exclamation from Sonia, a wild tearing at the water with his right, and a furious backing with his left, a burst of execrations from beyond, and another boat swept past them with no more than an inch or two to spare.

"Confound you! Why can't you look where you're going?" burst from him, in good round English and with all the natural vehemence of the one in the wrong, and was greeted with a broadside of German oaths, which died away as he bent to his stroke again.

"I'm sorry," he said, with a laugh. "It was all my fault. I was thinking of other things. I'd no idea there was so much traffic on the lake at night. I promise you it shan't happen again."

"I can swim."

"I would never have forgiven myself if you'd been put to it."

He pulled on strenuously till they were in the denser darkness under the wooded hill by Spiez, and the twinkling lights of the villages on the opposite side of the lake were like a necklace of glittering gold beads on a black velvet cushion.



"Now which is Unterhofen?" he asked, as he turned and hung on his oars.

"That!" without a moment's hesitation.

He pulled on for a time, and then suddenly stopped and bent forward.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Tired!"

"Tired? No. I thought I heard oars behind us. I'd had the same idea once or twice before," and they both strained their ears, but heard nothing.

"We'll try again," he said softly. "When I stop, listen your hardest, behind there," and he pulled on again and stopped suddenly.

"Yes," she whispered. "I heard oars distinctly, but they stopped when you did. Can they be following us on purpose?"

"It looks rather like it. What's the meaning of it, I wonder?"

"Perhaps it's those people we nearly ran into, and they want to know who we are."

"We'll do our best not to let them. They shall have a run for their trouble, anyway," and he swung the boat round and pulled straight up the lake towards Interlaken.

But they were evidently several, and, as he knew by experience, four oars are more than twice as good as two, and he found it impossible to shake them off.

"If I pull back, and put you ashore, say a mile or so from Unterhofen, will you be afraid to walk back to the Château?" he asked in a whisper.

"Afraid? No! But what about you?"

"It is evident that, for some reason or other, they want to know where we belong. I'm going to trick them if I can. If necessary I'll keep them on the go all night."

"You won't get into any trouble with them?"

"Not if I can help it."



She hesitated for a moment or two, in doubt as to what his actual intentions might be. Then she whispered—

“I will do whatever you think best,” and he turned and pulled back the way they had come, but saw no sign of the other boat.

“Will you be able to find the boat-house?” she asked.

“I’ll find it all right when I want to. When you get back you might put out the lantern. I remember we left it burning. Leave it in the corner by the door.”

“This is Gunten!” she said, as they came abreast of a cluster of lights. “Anywhere here will be all right for me.”

“You are sure you’ll be quite safe?”

“I shall be all right. Please don’t get yourself into any trouble.”

“I’ll do my best”—which did not by any means relieve her anxiety, but just then the boat bumped gently, and he stood up and took her hand, and she stepped lightly ashore.

He waited for a time to see if the others would come in also, but at last, hearing nothing, he pulled straight out into the darkness, without, as he thought, making a sound. All the same, he had not been rowing five minutes when he perceived that they were still after him.

“Hang ’em! What do they mean by it?” and he swung his boat round and waited, listening. He loosened the stretcher behind him and laid it on the seat ready for action, and then pulled furiously in the direction he had heard them last.

He was by this time quite in the humour for a fight. Nothing, at the moment, would have pleased him better than to run alongside that other boat and knock answers to some very pertinent questions out of its occupants. But with its extra power it could outmanœuvre him, and by the time he got there sound had given place to space.



But brain can sometimes get the better of brawn, and strategy succeed where force has failed.

With his prow turned in the direction whence the last faint indication of the pursuit had seemed to come, he back-watered vigorously and sent his boat along stern foremost as though proceeding on his way, and continued this method of progression for some minutes until he caught once more the wash of the oars behind.

Then, dipping his blades deep to bring his boat to a stand, he bent double with a tremendous reach and sent his boat flying back in the opposite direction, and, as he had hoped, came into violent collision with his pursuers.

So sudden and unexpected was his rush, that the look-out, kneeling in the bows of the other boat, had time for no more than a startled oath when Verney's craft crashed along the side of theirs, swept the oars on that side along with it, and bowled the oarsmen head over heels into the bottom of the boat.

Verney sprang up in his rocking craft and laid about him right heartily with his stretcher, thundering guttural German expletives the while in his gruffest tones.

The men under the thwarts, dazed and winded by their sudden upsetting, lay still; the look-out in the bows covered his head with his arms to ward off the flailing blows; it was an easy victory.

Verney jerked three of the oars off their pins and hurled them away into the darkness, then, with a final whack all round and another avalanche of guttural German, dropped back into his seat, and pulled quickly away, exceedingly well satisfied with himself and very joyful in his mind.

It was close on midnight, and there were not many lights in the houses for his guidance, but at length, stealing cautiously along the Unterhofen shore, he came on the



boat-house and was glad to find M. Joannot there, waiting to help him with the boat.

"Did Mademoiselle get home all right, M. Joannot?" he asked.

"Quite all right, Monsieur. And you—you had your affair out there?"

Verney described the affair as they slung and hoisted the boat, and M. Joannot chuckled with delight at the final episode.

"Now who could they be, and what did they want, following you like that, I wonder?"

"I can't imagine. By the way, we'd better see to the bow of that boat first thing in the morning. I went into them with a smash, and it may show signs."

"I will see to it, Monsieur. But, *mon Dieu*, I would like very much to know what they meant by it."

At the sound of them outside the window, Sonia jumped up from the stool on which she had been sitting by the open fire and opened and let them in, and her face could not conceal the relief she felt at seeing Verney safe and sound.

"I began to fear something had happened to you. Did you see any more of them?" she asked, with an abruptness which betrayed anxiety.

"Oh, yes, we had quite a discussion on the matter, and I think I managed to convince them that they really had no right to annoy people by following them about in the dark like that," and M. Joannot, with a bow and a murmur concerning Monsieur and supper, went off chuckling with much enjoyment.

"Did you fight?" she asked, eyeing him squarely.

"Oh, you could hardly call it that," he said deprecatingly. "I happened to run into them, and they were a bit upset, and I gave them a good talking-to in good full-blooded German, and pitched three of their oars over-



board, and then I came away. It was very good of you to send M. Joannot down to meet me."

"You didn't leave them in the water?" with a startled look.

"Not at all, but they had only one oar left, and it will take them some time to get home. How did you get on? No trouble, I hope."

"No—no. I hope not."

"Why? What happened?"

"I'm not sure that anything happened. I suppose one's conscience makes one a bit nervous——"

"What was it?"

"Well, the high-road branches just about where our wall begins. One part runs on through Unterhofen and along the lake. The other part runs down by our wall to the gates of the Château and the boat-landing and the school. When I got to the place where the roads part, and was turning into the one that comes down to the gates, I saw a gendarme coming along. I nearly ran into him, and he bade me good-night. It seemed to me he might wonder who I was if I went straight to the Château, so I turned off along the high-road, and went on to the cross-road by the landing-place, intending to get to the Château that way. But when I got round to the gate the stupid man had tramped back and was standing there, just as if he had suspected what I was at and was waiting for me. And I got a bit flustered. I thought of turning and going back. Then I thought it best to go on. So I rang the bell and came in. What he must have thought of me I can't imagine. I do hope I haven't done any harm."

"I shouldn't think so," he said cheerfully. "The man was probably just tramping his round, and it was, as you say, just your own larger knowledge of matters that made you suspicious of him. I wouldn't trouble about it, if I were you."



But then, of course, he knew nothing of that silver hair-pin Sonia had dropped at Noirburg.

"It is only that, in a village like this, every one knows everything, and every one talks. They will know exactly who came to the Château with Auntie, and it may set them wondering how I got here."

"Oh well, let them wonder a bit. Before they've got to the bottom of it we shall be away again," and he attacked the carefully-prepared supper M. Joannot set before him with his own august hands, with an appreciation that did justice to the master's skill and the occasion.



## CHAPTER XII

### THE SERGEANT MAKES FOUR

VERNEY was quite correct in his estimate of the gendarme matter. In itself there was nothing in it.

Hans Rupp had a certain amount of ground to cover, with his big slow feet and more or less vigilant eye, in a certain time.

He had strolled up to the high-road expectant of no more entertainment than it usually afforded him at that time of night.

He had growled a mechanical good-night to the cloaked figure, as he would to any other palpably human being he had met.

He had stood for a moment looking after it, and wondering which of the village women it was, and what she was doing out so late at night. And then he had turned and tramped heavily down to the boat-landing, to take the cross-road back into the high-road and so get on towards Hilterfingen.

Even his stolidity was a trifle roused at meeting the same woman again, just round the corner as it were, and at her going into the Château. He had thought they were all old women at the Château, and somehow this one did not give him an impression of antiquity. But since she went there it was doubtless all right, and he plodded on his darksome way and troubled his brain no more about the matter.

But, though one by itself is only one, one and one make two, and two and two make four—that is, to the ordinary mind. Metaphysicians, I believe, are prepared to under-



mine one's fundamental beliefs in even such elementary first principles by disputing each one of these generally accepted axioms.

So, to us ordinary common-sense people, one and one make two, and two and two make four, and to Hans Rupp—who was anything but a metaphysician—the little incident of the late-at-night-walking cloaked woman, who went into the Château, presented itself as nothing at all out of the common, until other matters cropped up, and then he remembered it and mentioned it.

For, while stolid Hans tramped on his black round by Hilterfingen, the other parts of the equation were struggling, with growls and curses, and one oar, and a board pulled up from the bottom of the boat, towards the nearest shore, and that happened to be the stretch between Gunten and Unterhofen, and there, in due course, they brought their cargo of ill-humour to safe landing.

Sergeant-of-gendarmes Peter Wyss, at Noirburg, being no metaphysician, when he heard of the escape of a female prisoner from Ste. Julienne, put one and one together and made a possible two.

A girl had escaped from Ste. Julienne, along with one of the wardresses. Three extraordinary Englishmen—extraordinary, that is, to Swiss common-sense, though for aught he knew it might be the custom for Englishmen to wear hairpins—had come into his district and had passed out of it—unless they were still within it—by unusual routes, without affording him, Peter Wyss, the pleasure of setting eyes upon them.

There was, of course, no obvious connection between these matters—not to the ordinary mind, that is.

But Peter Wyss's official brain, turning things over and over like a sausage machine, evolved this string of possibilities. Escaped girl and wardress would not be likely to wander about the country in their usual attire. Therefore



they would adopt a disguise. Three hairpin-wearing Englishmen have been seen, but have disappeared. Hairpins inevitably suggest girls, even though Englishmen may have sunk so far from manliness as to wear them also. Is it possible that the hairpin-wearing Englishmen and the escapees from Ste. Julienne are the same?

It was worth looking into, anyway. So Dummkopf, the blue policeman, who brought first word of the hairpin, was laughed at for his foolishness, and Sergeant Wyss set out to look into things on his own account.

The three unusual Englishmen had left Noirburg but never reached Plaffeyen. Therefore they quitted the road somewhere between these two points. If—and as regarded the next link in his sausage chain all depended on that *if*—if the escaped prisoner and the wardress had in some way metamorphosed themselves into three hairpin-wearing Englishmen—which, on the face of it, presented certain difficulties, though not perhaps insuperable ones—it seemed likely to him that they would naturally endeavour to get as far away from Ste. Julienne as possible. Therefore they would go east.

And so—at the point where the Plaffeyen road sweeps to the east to get round Guggisberg—he started on his search and presently came on the scent, fairly hot, at Reiffenmatt.

“Three tourists? Yes, surely! Sophie Annacher had spoken of such; or was it Anna Nufer? One or other, any way, and there they were, both of them, in the meadow over there with the goats. So—phie! An—na! Here! You’re wanted. Now which of you was it saw the three tourist gentlemen walking over the hills on Sunday. Ah, I thought all the time it was Sophie, but I couldn’t be certain, because they’re always together as a rule. Now, Sophie, tell the Herr Sergeant all about them, there’s a good girl! And look up at the Herr Sergeant when you



speak, and don't sniff! Ah, you saw them and that was all! You didn't speak to them nor they to you? No? And which way were they going now? Ah, towards Augstein! And they all had sticks and *rucksacs*, and one of them was singing. And what was he singing now? Ah, 'Roselein auf der Heider,' one of the songs you have at school. And that's all you know about them? All right, Sophie, and thank you!"

So to Augstein, and a blank. But a cast round, on the bare supposition that the travellers might possibly have their own reasons for not desiring to court observation, and here is an ancient man watching over a cow on the slope towards Mager Bad, who affirms that he saw, with his own eyes, three men walking along the side of Schupfen on Sunday. Taking it quite easy they were. Ay, they might be going by the head of the Langeneywald to Gurnigel, and then again they mightn't. He'd seen them, but he hadn't watched them. He'd got his cow to look after, and that took all his time without watching every fool man that crossed the hills. All right, Herr Sergeant, and many thanks for nothing. If the Herr Sergeant had ever had a cow such as this to look after, he'd know what devilment she could be up to if you took your eyes off her for so long as it took to light a pipe, if so be as you happened to have any tobacco about you. Oh, well, since the Herr Sergeant is so good—after all a pipeful is always a pipeful—well, yes, the three Herren had gone off along Seehbuhl, and if you put it to him straight it was in his mind they were making for Blumenstein, the other side of the hill.

And when the Sergeant had panted over the shoulder of Seehbuhl and saw the Thuner See shimmering in the distance below, it seemed to him that if he himself were an escapee from Ste. Julienne, which the gods forbid! he would certainly try to put that great sheet of water be-



tween himself and possible pursuit, for water is a prime breaker of scent.

So he set out boldly for the lake, and arrived, by way of Moos and the crossways, at the high-road, and so to Gwatt, wearier and sorer of foot than he had ever been in his life, and to his great disgust found Gwatt painfully and absolutely ignorant on the only matter that interested him.

After rest and refreshment he toiled back to Einigen.

Englishmen? No, no one in Einigen had set eyes on any Englishmen. Bad enough that one's own village folk should take to playing tricks on their neighbours which fell but little short of stealing. *Herr gott*, yes! and stealing it would have been if they'd been caught at it. And just let me tell you—for the benefit of the guilty parties in case they should be within hearing—that next time it happens there'll be a charge of small-shot that will travel faster than a boat.

What's it all about, Herr Sergeant? Why, it's this way. Last night—and Sunday night, no less—some rascal helped himself to one of our boats. No—wish we did. If we know who it was he'd hear about it, and maybe in a way he wouldn't like.

Oh, yes, he brought it back in time, some time in the night when everybody was asleep and so nobody saw him.

What's that, Herr Sergeant? Where can one go to from here? Why, anywhere on the lake, of course. That place straight across? Why, that's Unterhofen. Oh, yes, we could put you across there, of course. But one's time is valuable, you see. Oh well, if you put it in that way——

And so when, half-way across, the sergeant with his head full of prisoners escaping in the guise of Englishmen, came within an ace of running into a boat from which came an objurgative exclamation in what was neither French nor German, but what he took to be English, he



believed—and rightly enough, as we know—that he had got hold of the end of his puzzle, and that if he could only run it to earth he would find all he had been seeking.

The rest we know.

At the Unterhofen police-station, when, after much weary toil with one oar and a piece of board, he reached it, he inquired anxiously as to any new arrivals in the village within the last day or two, and was disgusted to learn that none such were known of.

Then Hans Rupp came in from his round, heard what was toward, and contributed his quota, and the Sergeant pricked up his ears and took heart again.

“And you did not know the woman?”

“I did not, Herr Sergeant, but then she had a big cloak all over her, head and all. Still I do not think she was of the village.”

“And she went into the Château?”

“That she did, I swear.”

“Who lives at the Château?”

“The Countess is there just now. She comes every year almost.”

“When did she come this year?”

“Oh, last week some time. Wednesday was it—or Thursday?”

“And who has she with her?”

“Just the same as usual. M. Joannot, the *chef*, and her old housekeeper, and two or three old servants. It is not a large household, and all old, and as ugly as sin.”

“And the woman you saw to-night?”

“Ah, I cannot say as to her, Herr Sergeant.”

“And none of you have seen or heard anything of three Englishmen, walking, with *rucksacs*?”

“All the Englishmen have gone a month ago. The place was full of them, but they go with the weather, you understand. There has not been an Englishman here for



two, three weeks now. The hotels are closing up, you see."

"Well, I'm about dead beat. Where can I get a bed and something to eat? To-morrow we will see."

And as he ate and drank, and after he had gone to bed too tired to sleep, the Herr Sergeant put his one to his one, and his two to his two, and thought he saw four as the result, and believed that his time had not been wasted.



## CHAPTER XIII

### IN THE NET

**M.** JOANNOT was up very early next morning, and he had just finished re-varnishing the abraded bows of the boat, when he heard the quiet wash of an oar on the water outside the boat-house.

The doors, fastened by stout iron hooks on the inside, were made of strong wooden slats, sloped downwards so as to admit the air and give free play to the waves of passing steamers but to keep out the warping sun. Through these, in consequence of the angle at which they were set, it was impossible to look straight into the house, but broken and distorted views might be obtained by bending down at the doors and peeping upwards, and M. Joannot heard the soft bump of a boat against the door, and saw two heads bending down and peering intently up into the semi-darkness.

There was plenty of cover inside, however, and a step took him behind a sail which had been hung up to dry and never furled.

"We can see nothing here," said one of the ogling heads. "Can't we get inside?"

"We'll have to climb up the wall there, and then it'll be locked," said the other.

"We'll try anyway. It's important we should know if that boat came in here," and they hauled their craft along towards the lake-side wall, into a gap in which the boat-house was built.

M. Joannot stepped noiselessly to the door, took the key inside, locked it and put the key in his pocket, and was behind his sail again before the inquisitors in the boat had scaled the wall.



He heard them at the door. They shook it, and swore at it, and peeped through the keyhole, but they could get no farther without resort to violence, and of that, on mere suspicion, he had no fear. And presently, with muttered comminations on a custom that barred original research into one's neighbour's private affairs, the disappointed ones dropped into their boat and pulled away, and M. Joannot went back to the house and bent his mind to menus.

"She will be down for breakfast," said Sonia, in answer to Verney's usual inquiry as to her sister. "The complete rest has done her good, but I don't think she is very strong. That hideous place has taken a good deal out of her. How long do you think we can safely stay here before we must set out again?"

"I'm afraid that must depend on circumstances, but we must try to make shorter stages next time," and his heart sang aloud that the shorter the stages the longer the journey would be.

"It might be wise to prepare as far as you can for a start at any moment," he said presently. "Then, if the necessity arises, no time will be lost."

"If they could have just two or three more days," said Madame, anxiously.

"We won't move until we have to, I promise you—not until you yourself see that it is inevitable, Madame. For their sakes I wish the necessity may not arise, but we cannot absolutely count on that."

"She will have to go, of course. I feel all the time that her only safety lies outside Switzerland. But every day's rest she can get is a gain to her, and truly she needs it all."

"Yes, I'm sure. But we will be more considerate of her next time, and take things very easily."

When he stepped out through the window for his morning stroll along the terrace and a smoke, M. Joannot



popped a white-capped head from behind a corner and signalled caution with a lifted finger.

"What now, M. Joannot——"

"I think, Monsieur, it would be advisable not to show yourself on the lake-wall to-day, if you do not mind."

"Oh—ho! What's up now? Enemy on the prowl?"

"They were at the boat-house early this morning, trying to get in to look at the boats. Fortunately I was inside and the door was locked. And if Monsieur will be so good as to glance through the trees out there he will see—what?"

"I see a boat out there—fishing, I should say."

"And, unless I am mistaken, Monsieur will see it there all day. Fishing?—oh yes, without a doubt but not for anything they hope to get out of the lake."

"Spying on us, you think?"

"I think so, Monsieur, though I cannot see why."

Verney told him of Sonia's meeting with the gendarme in the road.

"It is possible that may have roused their suspicion, though, indeed, that alone seems small ground for blockading us like this," he said thoughtfully. Then, "*Tenez*, Monsieur, come with me," and he led the way inside, and sped swiftly up many stairs to the top storey of the tower, and peering through first one window and then another, laid his hand on Verney's arm and murmured, "Yes, truly, there is something at work of which we are not aware. You see? They are watching us on this side also," and sure enough a blue gendarme was standing stolidly by the boat-landing, whence he could command all the approaches to the Château on that side.

"Yes," nodded Verney. "Now, I wonder how on earth they've located us. It seems to me we must be ready to flit again, M. Joannot. They're not likely to come right in on us, I suppose?"—with just a touch of anxiety. For



actively assisting the escape of a prisoner was one thing, and actively opposing inquisitive authority by force was another and of a much more serious complexion, though, for Sonia's sake, he would have stopped at nothing.

"I should not think it," said M. Joannot. "But one never knows. It might be well to think of getting away, Monsieur. If they give us till to-night we can manage it all right. I had thought not to disturb the ladies, but in view of this"—with a jerk of the head towards the watcher outside—"I'm afraid it is inevitable. Is Mlle. Darya capable of going on yet?"

"She is fairly fit again, they say. But we shall have to take things easier. She is not very strong."

"You had better prepare them, and it would be as well that none of you should be seen from that boat, you understand. There is ample room to walk in the garden quite out of sight of the lake, and we are not overlooked on the other side."

"I will see them at once," and with a last look at the boat on the lake and the gendarme at the landing-place, they went down the many stairs somewhat more thoughtfully than they had mounted them.

Verney found one of the old servants, and sent her in quest of Sonia, who appeared presently with a face alert for the meaning of his summons.

"I'm afraid we may have to move on sooner than we hoped," he began.

"What's wrong?" she asked quickly.

"We are blockaded before and behind. M. Joannot has just had me up into the tower. There is a boat out there on the lake, apparently fishing, he says watching, and on shore there is a gendarme with his eye on the gate of the Château. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes"—breathlessly, and they sped together up the many stairs again.



"What can they mean?" she panted hotly. "What right have they——"

"Oh, well, you know," he laughed. "If it comes to rights they might make out a pretty good case of their own. But what can have set them on our track I can't imagine. They're a sight smarter than one would ever have believed. They were at the boat-house early this morning, trying to get a sight of that boat we had last night."

"Why?"

"It ran into them, you know, and was bound to get a bit scratched."

"Perhaps it is that they're after," she caught at the hope. "They want to pay some one back for—well, for whatever you did to them."

"That would hardly account for such comprehensive measures. There must be more in it, I think, than that. They've lighted on something, or think they have, but I can't imagine what. Anyway I'm afraid it means an early move. M. Joannot advises to-night."

She tapped the ground impatiently with her foot.

"I did want another day or two for Darya——"

"If we can safely do it she shall certainly have them. But we don't want to come into actual collision with the authorities, if we can help it. Of course if they tried to get in we might have to keep them out, and that might become serious."

"Did they get into the boat-house this morning?"

"No. M. Joannot locked himself in and waited there till they had gone. I wonder, now, if he could learn anything outside?" and they went downstairs to suggest it to him.

And as they went: "I believe you are glad to be thinking of moving on again, Mr. Verney," said Sonia.



"I would stop here a month to suit you and Mlle. Darya."

"But, all the same, you like the road better."

"It was very delightful, wasn't it?" he confessed. "But I hope you don't think——"

"If I did we would not be going with you. I suppose it is natural for a man to want to be doing something. We women, you see——"

"You, at all events, have done more than most, and done it well. I've a feeling that we're going to get out of this tangle all right and get right through to safety."

"You make me feel hopeful too. It is good to be of a cheerful disposition."

Nevertheless, if she had told him all that was in her mind, he would have discovered in it a slight feeling that it was his wilfulness of the previous night, in inflicting chastisement on their pursuers, which had led to the blockade of this morning, and she was by no means assured that there was anything more in the latter than a desire for satisfaction on the part of the chastised ones.

The day passed quietly. But all day long the fishing-boat lay out there, and seemed to catch nothing. In truth a most patient and persistent fisherman!

In view of a possibly earlier move than they had intended, Darya was prevailed upon to take all the rest she could get, by way of storing up energy against contingencies, and Sonia busied herself upstairs in such preparations as it was possible for her to make.

It was not until after supper that M. Joannot went out to do some private shopping, and incidentally to pick up any news that was going. On his return he came straight to the dining-room, where Sonia and Madame and Verney sat by the fire awaiting him. They saw at once by his face that he had gathered something of importance.

"It was at Truller's my tobacconist's, that I heard. It



was a sergeant of gendarmes from Noirburg, who was crossing from Einigen last night when you ran into his boat," he said, looking at Verney, and Sonia looked at him, too, with the little accusing touch in her eye. "They lost their oars and only get here early this morning. But that is not the trouble. He is inquiring for three tourist Englishmen who left Noirburg on Sunday morning for Plafeyen, and never arrived there;" and Sonia flushed briefly at her previous misjudgment. "*Voilà*, Mesdames! With permission, it seems to me that you should resume your journey without delay," and Sonia jumped up, in no little agitation at the unwelcome news.

"Why can't they leave us alone? I wonder how on earth they discovered us."

"They probably only suspect, so far. But from what M. Truller says, this sergeant is evidently a pushing man, and he must have a head on his shoulders to have got so close as this. Will you go on to-night, Mademoiselle?"

"I'm afraid we've no choice. What do you say, Mr. Verney?"

"It seems to me that the sooner we put a few score miles between us and this pushful sergeant the better."

"I will prepare Darya. But—stay! If they are looking for three Englishmen ought we to travel as before?"

"I was just thinking of that. But, you see, we shall make for new districts where they have not heard of these three Englishmen——"

"Unless this man telegraphs all round as soon as he finds we are gone."

"He might do that, of course. Still I'm inclined to think that disguise is the safest——"

"With permission, Monsieur, from what I could gather he is not very likely to telegraph. The chances are that he sees possibilities for himself in this affair, and will try to keep it to himself and get all he can out of it. He could



have telegraphed here from Noirburg, you see, but he preferred to come himself."

"Very well reasoned, M. Joannot. He sees promotion, so he will keep the scent to himself."

"Then we will go as before. How soon?" asked Sonia.

"From here about three in the morning," said M. Joannot, who had evidently been planning it all in his mind, and Sonia sat down again.

"And how do we get past the blockading squadron, M. Joannot?" asked Verney.

"At two o'clock I shall start out in a boat with old Barbara," and the dark eyes twinkled merrily in the pallid face. "You will be all ready with the other boat. You will watch and listen. The chances are that the spy-boat will signal to the shore and follow me. Possibly the Sergeant will follow in another boat. You must wait and see. That is what I would do if I were in his place. If that happens, then your course is clear. You go right across to Faulensee, leave the boat aground as far away from the houses as possible, and I will come round for it later, and I will do my best to get it home unseen."

"Capital! You are a treasure, M. Joannot," which M. Joannot accepted with a smiling and acquiescent bow.



## CHAPTER XIV

### THROUGH THE NET

**M**ATTERS fell out very much as M. Joannot's acumen had foreseen.

At two o'clock they bade farewell to Madame, and she clung to the girls as though she feared to let them go, and kissed them as if it were for the last time. Darya still looked somewhat worn and tired, and the faces of both were pale and anxious, for this hurried flight in the dark gave them a feeling of impending danger, which cheery words were powerless to remove.

"God keep you, my dears!" said the old lady fervently. "Let me know as soon as you are in safety and I will come at once."

Then they stole away to the boat-house, and found M. Joannot and old Barbara awaiting them, and the boats ready in the water.

"With Madame's permission, I have improved upon my original plan, Monsieur, to this extent," whispered M. Joannot. "The boat you will take is our oldest. When you are safe ashore put in some boulders and knock a hole in it, and push it well out from the land, and it will tell no tales. The water is very deep out there. You see, I might have been seen bringing it home, and it is best to be on the safe side."

"That is well thought of, M. Joannot. Any further suggestions now?"

"You will wait, Monsieur, till you are quite sure that all who are going to follow us have passed," he whispered. "Then pull out somewhat to the north for five minutes, and then go right down past Spiez to Faulensee. The spy boat



is out there. You will see if they signal to the shore. That is all. Mesdemoiselles, with all my heart I wish you God speed and *bon voyage!* Adieu!"

He assisted old Barbara noiselessly into the boat, and slowly pushed open the doors of the boat-house.

Verney as noiselessly handed the girls into the other boat, with a whispered caution against the slightest sound.

"Adieu! adieu!" whispered M. Joannot, and hauled his boat along by the open door, and was swallowed up by the darkness. The others sat peering out into the night.

M. Joannot had greased all the pins, and he went off so noiselessly that Verney feared the watch-boat might not discover him. Possibly the same idea occurred to M. Joannot himself, for, from the direction in which he had gone, there came the unmistakable sound of an oar in the water.

Instantly a tiny spark pricked the darkness over in the direction of the watch-boat, and their straining ears caught the sound of oars going off after M. Joannot.

Verney's attention was concentrated on what should follow. But no second boat came, and he edged out into the lake and waited anxiously.

No sign of a boat! Could they possibly have fathomed M. Joannot's intention, and declined to be misled? His anxiety grew. Then Sonia laid her hand on his arm.

"The other boat has gone from the landing-place. Listen!" and sure enough they heard the throb of oars from the other side of the Château, where the village boats lay.

"We will give them three more minutes," he whispered, and when he calculated they were up, bent to his oars and drove the boat towards the middle of the lake with long noiseless strokes.

Sonia had wanted to help him, but he begged her to reserve her strength. Perhaps also he thought that two



oars in his own hands would make less noise than four between two of them. In any case nothing could have been more silent than their progress. Save for the ripple at their bows, they sped along the black water like a darker patch of shadow.

Past the low-lying shore of Einigen—past the solid blackness of the hill of Spiez;—past Spiez itself, all asleep, with only a dim light here and there—past the feathery darkness of the Bürghill with Faulensee sleeping below it; then a searching quest along the rocky shore for a landing-place, a pull with the left, and the boat's nose grated for the last time on shingle.

Verney handed the girls ashore, sought out rocks of size and laid them noiselessly in the boat, then with the butt of an oar started a plank, and pushed the boat out as far as he could manage it.

“Dear old boat!” murmured Sonia. “I have known it for years. It feels cruel to kill it like that.”

“I know,” said Verney softly, “But it is safest so, and M. Joannot advised it. I will carry the oars a bit and then hide them. Shall we get on?”

They moved silently up the rising ground in the strange dim twilight that precedes the dawn, and upon all their spirits the circumstances of this new and hastily enforced pilgrimage hung a little heavily as yet.

Even Verney, eagerly as he had been longing for it, and with such joyful anticipation, felt a slight sense of depression. But he said to himself that it was all on the girls' account, and truly, for them, and for Darya especially, he acknowledged that it was hard to be forced to flee like this in the night—all the comforts and tender care of Unterhofen behind—all the toils and unknown possibilities of the future in front. In a word, they were all feeling something of the anxious foreboding of the hunted, with-



out, for the moment, the exhilarating experiences of the previous escape.

The girls climbed on without a word. Verney carried their *rucksacs* and the oars, till he came upon a convenient thicket of rank grass and bushes into which he pushed the latter out of sight.

"Now, Mademoiselle," he said to Darya, "you will please take my arm."

"Oh, I'm not tired yet," she panted.

"Of course not. But I'm going to be a very strict tutor this time. My pupils are not to be allowed even the chance of over-tiring themselves, and this uphill start takes one's breath."

They dropped into the road at last, and turned to the left along it. It was not yet four o'clock, and they had it all to themselves.

"Thanks to M. Joannot, we have made an excellent start and left no trace behind us," said Verney cheerfully. "I wonder how he and old Barbara have got on, and what the pushing gentleman from Noirburg will do next? Anyway I don't think we need trouble our heads about him. We have plenty of time before us, and we are just going to jog easily along like this, and get all the pleasure out of our little trip that we can. The moment either of you feel the first premonition of tiredness you are to say so, and we stop for a rest. I wonder if you thought of soaping your stockings."

"We did," said Sonia. "Mine are clammy and uncomfortable yet."

"Better too much than too little. You'll feel the benefit presently."

"How many days will it take us, Mr. Verney?" asked Darya.

"Well—let us see. But you're not tired yet?" and he looked down anxiously at her.



"No, no, I'm not tired. I was just wondering. It is pleasant to look forward to the end"—which, after all, was a matter dependent entirely on one's point of view. For himself he was looking forward to the journey itself infinitely more than to its end.

"Well—we shall presently walk quietly across those little hills over there on the right, and drop down into the Suld Thal, and from there in due course make our way over into the Frutigen Thal, somewhere about Kien. In that way we shall avoid the high-roads altogether. We won't go into Frutigen itself, but will try for accommodation at Schwändi or Weissey. Then to-morrow we have a choice of routes. We can keep along the high-road to Kanderteg—or we can strike into the Engstligen Thal and so get to Adelboden and across country in time to the Gemmi. The advantage of that is that there are bridle paths on the other side of the river all the way up the valley, and we would never need to touch the high-road at all."

"That's the road for us," said Sonia.

"It is somewhat longer——"

"But undoubtedly safer, and time is of no consequence to us"—a sentiment which chimed absolutely with his heart's desire.

"The Engstligen Thal then, and that should land us somewhere near Adelboden to-morrow evening. We avoid the village, of course. Then next day we make our way across to the Gemmi Road, and take things very easily over the high ground. The following day, we come down by the Dauben See and the Galleries, and sleep somewhere—I don't know where yet. Past Leukerbad next day—all down hill now, and so to Leuk, if we think well—or to Varen up in the hills, if we think better. From there—that is, from the Rhone Valley, we have large choice of ways, and can choose the pleasantest when we get there. But I am looking forward to this easy tramp among the



hills to set you both up and bring you in fitter at the end than at the start."

"If we avoid the beaten tracks," said Sonia, "I don't see how that objectionable man from Noirburg can ever hear of us, and we can take things as easily as we please," which again was quite to his mind.

"Oh—look!" said Sonia breathlessly, just as they were about to turn off the road to take the further slope.

And there, away up above the lower world of sleep, where the shadows still lingered grayly, the snowy crowns of the Jungfrau and the Mönch and Eiger had suddenly peeped out, glowing softly in the first rays of the rising sun. Just the topmost peaks washed with liquid gold hung there in the thin upper air, so ethereal and heavenly in their sublime detachment that they looked as if an incautious breath might blow them away.

"Oh—beautiful! beautiful! beautiful!" murmured Darya. "I have never seen anything so beautiful as that."

"We will take it as an omen," said Verney softly.

"Think of being buried on a peak like that, that caught the first rays of the sun each day," said Darya.

"We won't think anything of the kind," he replied cheerfully. "It's much nicer to think of being alive and enjoying the sight of it from the outside. I believe you're feeling hungry. In half an hour we shall get the sun on top of the hill here, and then we'll sit in it and pass compliments on M. Joannot's provisioning. That will be miles away better than being buried up there in the snow."

"I don't know," she said slowly, with her eyes still fixed intently on the glowing peaks. "They are so restful, so peaceful, so . . . so heavenly," and there was that in her voice which spoke, with an eloquence beyond words, of all she had suffered, all she still feared, all she most longed for.



The golden light flowed down the peaks, the shadows below began to thin, the gray veils showed tints of colour through them, the nearer heights—the Morgenberg in front, Niessen behind, and the wild piles of the Blümlisalp—all caught the glory, and glowed with the fervour of sun-worshippers.

“It is the silence of it all that is so wonderful,” said Sonia. “They seem as if they all ought to be singing their loudest.”

“I was just thinking that very same thing,” said Verney. “What a singing it would be if they could! ‘The morning stars sang together, and the sons of God shouted for joy.’”

“Who was it said that?” she asked quickly. “I knew there was something on my mind.”

“An old gentleman called Job, who suffered much tribulation but came out all right in the end. Now boys, the brae! the brae! and a stout heart to it!” and they turned and climbed the eastern hill.



## CHAPTER XV

### ROUGH QUARTERS

“**N**OW, Pat, my boy,” and the dark blue eyes shot a quick glint at him, half surprise and more than half amusement, with still some space left for understanding. “Oh, we must get down to our respective rôles, you know, or we may forget ourselves when we oughtn’t to,” he said, in reply to the glint. “If you’ll spread your cloak on that fairly dry rock we’ll bid M. Joannot good-morning,” and he proceeded to lay out the provisions.

“Roast chicken—*à la* Joannot—most thoughtfully carved, and all put together again so that it looks as if it had never known a knife in its life! Rolls, butter—those little curly scrolls of ham would set a mummy’s mouth watering!—one, two, three separate and divers kinds of sausage; a pot of honey, three small bottles of sparkling Asti, two surely for the aged professor and one between them for the boys!—a number of most delicious little cakes—a piece of cheese—Brie, unless I am mistaken!—a Lucullian feast, oh, most worthy M. Joannot! Would that you might cater for my old age!”

“You would probably wax stout and get out of condition,” laughed Sonia.

“Never! Not under the forethoughtful care of M. Joannot! We discussed such matters on the lake the other night.”

“What an inspiring theme! And how you must have enjoyed yourselves!”



"Oh, we did, I assure you. The essence of polite conversation, you see, is to lead a man to speak on the subject he knows best. M. Joannot is an artiste—a master. Eat little, drink little, but always of the very best! That was his text and the burden of his discourse. If you eat too much you lose the finer powers of perception in matters gastronomic. If you drink too much—well, I do not need to enlarge upon that head, and that is why I suggest that, in putting in three bottles of Asti, M. Joannot undoubtedly intended two for the preceptor and one for the pupils."

"Now, candidly," he broke out again, as they sat enjoying their breakfast and the prospect below and around them, "have you ever eaten under more delightful conditions? This sweet air is finer than any sauce man ever dreamed of. That glimpse of the lake through that gap there, and the green and white giants all round us, are as titillating to the higher senses as M. Joannot's forget-me-nots are to the lower."

"Forget-me-nots?" said Sonia, gazing at him.

"Undoubtedly forget-me-nots! I am quite sure that when the worthy M. Joannot was busying himself on this provisioning, he said to himself: 'And as they eat, perchance a thought of me may supervene.' And so it shall! Boys, I give you, with all my heart and with the greatest satisfaction—Monsieur Joannot!—the Founder of the Feast!" and then in the varied tones of a public meeting he called "Monsieur Joannot! Monsieur Joannot!" and then proceeded to chant for their benefit, "For he's a jolly good fellow!" right through to its final "Hip, hip, hip!" And when he had finished, he looked at them reproachfully and said. "It is usual for all the company to join in the sentiment. In this case the chorus was painfully noticeable by its absence. However, perhaps, though your hearts were with me, the tune was new to you, so you are excused, and



I promise you M. Joannot shall never know how you slighted him. And now, gentlemen"—rapping with his stick on the rock—"You are permitted to smoke. Though, whether the aged preceptor should permit his youthful pupils to indulge, so early in the morning, he is rather doubtful."

"The youthful pupils will please themselves," said Sonia, drawing out a little silver cigarette-case from her trouser-pocket with a defiant and swashbuckler air. "Since we have to wear the trammels of the other sex, we may as well claim their privileges also."

"Trammels!" snorted Verney. "And I was flattering myself that you would find them such a delightfully free and easy change, after the complicated mysteries of womanly garb."

But though they two prattled away at any nonsense that came into their heads, Darya was very quiet and thoughtful. She smiled at their absurdities at times, but made no effort to join in them.

"You are not tired, dear?" asked Sonia anxiously.

"Oh, no! It is just that I can't help feeling having to leave Auntie and home again so soon."

And that was only natural. To one who had been, so ruthlessly and so long, deprived of home and kin, the brief renewal of these incalculable joys had been like a resurrection from the dead. To have kind faces and loving eyes about one, in place of the cold austerities of the prison-house; soft draperies and pictures, in place of those deadly whitewashed walls; loving words and sympathetic little attentions, in place of the unvarying round of mean and thankless tasks. Ay, it was more than resurrection. It was akin to a heavenly translation. And then—almost before she had had time to savour the joy of it, the cup had been whisked away, and here she was once more a hunted fugitive on the hill-sides.



To the others—and to Verney especially—it was a high adventure, to be carried through with what enjoyment could be got out of it, all the enjoyment heightened and deepened by the knowledge that, delightful as it might be to oneself, it was also assuredly ministering to the happiness of another.

But to Darya it was a matter of life or death. For, since she had tasted freedom again, she had never ceased to say to herself that death—quiet, peaceful, happy death—would be infinitely—oh, infinitely! infinitely!—preferable to a return to Ste. Julienne.

The others, though they laughed and joked and babbled nonsense, were fully alive to the feelings which might be in her. But these things they did of set purpose, and solely to divert her thoughts from brooding on the past, and to make light of that which might lie in wait for them in the future.

They were blessed with a golden autumn day. There were clouds indeed in plenty, but mostly banked up in the north, with only pure white argosies sailing over them at times to deepen the pure deep blue behind; and the sun shone gloriously all day long.

“If we could only climb up on to one of those lovely cloud-bergs and go on sailing, on and on,” said Sonia, stretched flat on her cloak with her hands clasped behind her head, as they lay resting one time.

“On and on for ever,” said Darya longingly.

“It looks solid enough,” said Verney, “but, unless it’s made of manna or something of that kind, I fear we would begin to miss M. Joannot in time.”

“When you float on cloud-bergs you never need to eat,” said Sonia with confidence.

“That’s fortunate. You speak from experience?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been many a long journey on them, and



such a thought as hunger never troubled me in the slightest."

"How did you get up?"

"Oh, I just went. 'Projected myself,' is the proper way to put it, I suppose. Just think now what you'd see from that white beauty straight up there. Thuner See and Brienzer See just little white gleams; Jungfrau and the rest, little white pimples; Lauterbrunnen Valley a black gash; the Rhone Valley a wide little gutter."

"And we three lying here?"

"Invisible, of course, but if visible smaller than the smallest ants."

"And yet packed so full of sensations! Perhaps the ants are packed as full in their own little way. It's odd to think of."

"They're an uncannily clever little people, from all accounts."

"I wonder if they have prisons and shut one another up in them," mused Darya.

"Time to move!" said the Preceptor promptly for all their wish was to keep her from all thought of such things.

They came down the shoulder of Greberen into the Suld Thal a little south of Ried, and kept the country road there for an easy hour without meeting a soul, which they counted all to the good.

Verney's Pandora-rucksac provided a lunch as adequate as their very early breakfast. He peremptorily insisted on them all taking a nap after it, and set them an excellent example by lying down in the warmth of a sun-bathed rock and falling asleep in an instant.

When he woke and sat up and lit a contemplative cigar, the two girls were still fast asleep, wrapped up in their cloaks, and he would not disturb them.

Instead, he got out his map and studied again the country in front, and decided, as a still further measure



of precaution, to rest that night at a little village named Warus, up on the hillside on the southern slope of the Kien Thal—a village so small as to have even no connecting link on the map with any place adjacent. He could only hope that so small a place might be able to furnish them with accommodation of some kind. For the next few nights he foresaw that a certain amount of roughing-it would be inevitable, but that after all, was of small importance compared with the additional safety ensured by it.

Sonia sat up at last, and looked about her as her hands went up to her hair to repair damages. She nodded to Verney under his distant rock, and looked down at the still sleeping Darya.

"Is it time to be moving?" she called to him, in a magnified whisper.

"There is no pressing hurry," he said, coming across to her with his open map.

"I hate to disturb her, poor child. When she is asleep she is at any rate free from her troubles, and it is good for her."

"Here is what I have been thinking," he said, as he spread the map in front of her, and he detailed his plans and his reasons. "It may entail some rudeness of quarters for the night," and he looked doubtfully at her.

"Oh, that is nothing. We can put up with it, you and I"—and the accepted conjunction of their feelings in the matter pleased him mightily. "And as for our poor Dolly—the roughest that Freedom can offer her will be heaven compared with what she has gone through. Let us sacrifice everything to safety, Mr. Verney."

"I knew you would feel that way about it. I hope we have not over-tired her," as he looked down at the sleeping girl.

"Oh, I am sure not. It is just this strong clear air,



and her not being accustomed to it of late. If we can go along quietly like this for a week, without anything to alarm or disturb her, I'm inclined to think it will do her a world of good."

"I'm sure it will. And if we keep away from the roads and larger villages, I don't see how they could possibly get on our track, except by a most miraculous chance."

"And you don't repent yet of your rash undertaking?"

"Do I look as if I did?"—and, truly, a more unrepentant undertaker of rash adventure it would have been hard to find.

"Well," she said, with a shake of the head, "I can only hope you never will."

"I'll promise you that at once."

"I knew you were an exceedingly rash young man, that first day at St. Peter's, when you offered me your help before you had the smallest idea of what it was I wanted."

"The proof of the pudding is in the eating," as my good friend, M. Joannot, would say. The rashness all round seems to me to have turned out uncommonly well."

"You haven't finished your pudding yet," she said quietly.

And then she bent over the sleeping Darya, and gently put back the cloak, and kissed her, murmuring, "It is time we went on, dear. I am sure you feel the better for your sleep."

Darya sat up, with a startled look in her eyes which told of nerves not yet quite normally attuned.

"What is it?" she jerked out, as though the fear of some untoward happening was ever present with her. Then seeing nothing unusual in the aspect of the others, "Have I slept too long?" she asked, and came back to normal with, "I was very far away. What a blessing one can sleep and forget all about oneself for a time! If I could I would just like to sleep on and on and on——"



"In which case we would have to make a cat's cradle with our hands and carry you all the way to Warus," said Verney.

"Besides, you wouldn't sleep at night, in that case," said Sonia in a matter-of-fact way.

"Oh yes, I would—if I had my way," said Darya, meaningly, from which you may see that her spirits were not of the highest.

The rest had done them all good, however, and they rambled down among the Kien Thal woods in so leisurely a fashion that fatigue was out of the question.

"I've been thinking," said Verney, "that we had better be Germans for a spell."

"Tired of being crazy Englishmen?" asked Sonia.

"It's not that, but you see we're going among villagers now, and we may not get what we want unless we can make it very plain to them. Then again, if by any thousand-to-one chance that over-obtrusive individual from Noirburg should make any inquiries concerning three crazy Englishmen who don't understand any German, in this neighbourhood, three stolid Germans who don't understand anything but German might not suggest themselves to the natives as being the same thing at all. Can you make yourselves brusque enough to pass for Germans, do you think?"

"If we try very hard," said Sonia.

"I feel dull enough for half-a-dozen Germans," said Darya.

They crossed the stony bed of the river just as the sun's last rays tipped the rugged pile of the Gspalterhorn and the tumbled masses of the Blümlisalp, at the head of the valley, with fiery gold.

"We have seen Alpha and Omega," said Verney as they lingered to watch it. "And now for Warus."

The glow faded swiftly up the snow caps and vanished.



The solid white clouds sailing in from the north held it still for a time, but below them the great white peaks stood cold and repellent. A chill wind swept down the valley. The girls drew their cloaks about them, and they pressed on up the opposite slope in silence.

Warus was not in the habit of accommodating visitors, and the request in sonorous German for beds and food threw the little drink-shop, which was the only possible resting-place, into a high fever.

At first it was flatly declared to be impossible. For, see you, it was not once in six months that they were asked such a thing, and then—behold, six people in one day!

“Six?” growled Verney. “How six? We are but three.”

“Ach, there it is! By some not-to-be-understood-but-none-the-less-extraordinary coincidence, already three travellers had come to stop the night.”

“So!” growled Verney. “That is unfortunate.”

“Could not the three Herren go on to Scharnacht or to Schwändi?”

“Impossible, Herr Landlord! My pupils are dead tired and cannot walk another step. Who are these already-come three guests?”

“Italians,” said the landlord, glancing through the open door of the dingy drinking-room, and added under his breath, “and not of the best, but one could not refuse them, you see. If the Herren had only come first——” It was evident he would much have preferred their company.

“Well now, for once in a way, Herr Landlord, some shift is surely possible. And good money does not come too readily, maybe.”

“It is true,” and he scratched his head to quicken his wits. “Perhaps—could you manage with one room? But



no—there is only one bed in it. Our own room, you understand——”

“Come then, we will manage it all right. My pupils are of the quality, you see. They can have the room. I can manage for the night on four chairs in the *salon*. What about eating? Have the Italian gentlemen eaten you bare?”

“Oh, we can manage. There is soup, and the wife is good at omelettes. There is also veal, unless those others have eaten it all. And cheese. And bread.”

“Famous! We shall live till to-morrow after all. You will put clean sheets on the young Herren’s bed.”

“Of course, of course! Enter then!”

“All the same,” murmured Verney in Sonia’s ear. “Under the circumstances I should not disrobe too much, if I were you,” and they followed the landlord inside.

It was a dingy little hole at best, and the smoke of three unusually bad Italian cigars, and the presence of three unusually truculent-looking Italian workmen, did not make for improvement.

Six glittering black eyes shone through the smoke at them, as their owners perfunctorily touched their caps to the strangers, and the strangers responded in kind.

“I prescribe a cigarette each for you, and for myself a cigar, lest we be poisoned,” said Verney. “Did you ever smell such stuff in all your life? I’m sorry the accommodation is so poor. It’s worse even than I feared. But one could not possibly foresee those Italians. Even Bae-deker says nothing about them!”

“It is nothing,” said Sonia. “Please don’t let it trouble you, Herr Verney. The landlord at all events is honest, I think.”

“That’s a serious implication against our friends over yonder,” he said, with a smile. “But you are quite right. The landlord at all events is honest and we will have noth-



ing to do with our fellow-guests. It's extraordinary how one comes to trust the Swiss, and how rarely one's trust is betrayed. In some cases one might be inclined to say that they confine their misdeeds to their hotel bills, but that's all in the way of business, of course, and their harvest-time is not a long one."

"Why do all the Italians one meets in Switzerland look like bandits?" murmured Sonia through a cloud of smoke.

"Shabby velveteens, trousers tucked into boots, red ties, blue belts, sallow dirty faces, and eyes like snakes make a very fair bandit outfit," said Verney. "But it's not perhaps always fair to judge by appearances. They look very typical, and I suppose there are such things as honest Italians. But Switzers are certainly more to my taste."

"I'm afraid you won't get much sleep, Mr. Verney," said Darya sympathetically.

"I shall be perfectly all right down here. And, truly, if they offered me a room at any distance from yours I wouldn't accept it. I'd much sooner be here. I will take a longer nap than usual at mid-day to-morrow," by which they knew that it was his intention to keep on the watch through the night, and their minds were more at rest in consequence.

The three Italians were disputatiously busy with a greasy pack of cards, but whenever either of the other party looked their way—which, though contrary to their inclination, they found themselves by the very attraction of repulsion quite unable to avoid doing—one or other pair of shifty, quick-glancing black eyes was always gleaming back at them through the floating coils of smoke.

The food which the landlord presently set before them was, however, on a more satisfactory plane than either his table equipment or his sleeping accommodation. The soup was good, the omelettes excellent, a savoury little



fricasse of veal, betokened moderation on the part of the Italians, and bread and Brie rounded off a better meal than they had dared to expect. Mine host's special department proved equal even to the production of a bottle of very decent wine, and his coffee stood the test of consumption when laced with a thread of cognac fine.

He beamed broadly when Verney congratulated him on his provisioning, and generously ascribed the virtues to his wife.

"You ought to be on one of the well-known routes and making a fortune," said Verney. "Your light is hidden up here on the hill-side."

"Ah—ha! That may come, *mein Herr*, when the opportunity offers. The wife, you see, was in service at Spiez, at one of the hotels,—yes, the *Schöneegg*—and she learned how to do things there."

"You will congratulate Madame on our behalf. All she needs is a better field for her accomplishments, and that we will wish you."

"The Herr is very good and Madame will be charmed. The room is prepared for the young Herren whenever they wish. It is the one immediately above this."

"They will smoke another cigarette and then they will go. Where are our noisy friends over there bound for?"

"Ach! They are not to our taste at all, but what would you? They do the work for which our own people are not adapted, and the works are necessary. At Kandersteg and at Muhlinen there is work going on, and there are always plenty of them passing to and fro. But for me, I do not like them," and he bent and whispered, "They are always quarrelling and they are not over clean. The Herren go on to Kandersteg to-morrow?—to Adelboden?—to Spiez? Up the Kien Thal? It is very fine scenery up there—the Blümlisalp, the Gspalterhorn."

"We just ramble round to see the scenery and stop



where the spirit moves us. How far is it to Kandersteg and the Oeschinen See?"

"Half a mile, German, to Frutigen, one mile and a quarter to Kandersteg. The Oeschinen See—very fine—magnificent—half a mile further."

"Ah—our German miles are long miles. Well, we will see in the morning. You will give us early breakfast at seven, and Madame will perhaps graciously provide us with some eatables for the road, in case we are on the hill-sides when we are hungry—and a bottle of that wine we have just enjoyed."

"All shall be done, *mein Herr*, and if the young Herren will just come through to the kitchen when they are ready, I will show them the way to their room. For the Herr himself I will bring down some blankets and a pillow."



## CHAPTER XVI

### THE BLACK-FACED THREE

**S**KILLED craftsmen as the Swiss are in certain of the arts, and especially in the manipulation of wood to all its possible uses, there are some departments which they leave almost entirely, in certain cantons at all events, to their southern neighbours.

Hence, here and there—like scrofulous eruptions on the fair face of nature, like slums among the picturesque native chalets—great cantonments of Italian labourers, building railways, *funiculaires*, what not—all doubtless very necessary from the utilitarian Swiss point of view, but abominable to the lover of Nature pure and simple, and disgusting and depressing from all other points of view, save, perhaps, the Italian.

In such colonies dirt reigns supreme. The houses are hideous rows of wooden barracks, grimy and unwholesome. Chickens, children, and mud abound. The men, in shabby velveteens or blue jeans, are a quick-eyed, black-jowled race; the women tawdry and gipsy-like, and given to cheap clothing of painfully obtrusive hues.

It is, however, never wise to condemn wholesale, to diatribe on but a distant acquaintance, or to diagnose without full investigation. These excrescent communities may be thrifty, healthy, moral, and altogether desirable in every possible way. But they do not look it, and after all one has to judge a casual acquaintance more or less by his looks.

In all such communities there is of necessity a constant coming and going—a shedding off of discordant elements



—a weeding-out of the least desirable; and the weeds are anything but helpful contributions to the countryside at large.

The three whom our friends encountered at Warus were weeds of the weediest. Outcast from one cantonment after another where only workers were wanted, they had yesterday tried Muhlinen and to-day would approach Kandersteg, unless an opportunity more to their taste should occur between the two.

The landlord and his wife slept that night in the kitchen, and, with Verney on four chairs in the front room, felt fairly easy in their minds.

“You slept?” he asked Verney, when he came in early in the morning to set the room to such rights as was possible.

“Oh, yes, I slept. The strong air tells upon one, you see.”

“It is good air. Now I will see to the Herren’s breakfast as speedily as possible, and the eatables to carry with them.”

“You might knock on the door of the young Herren’s room, and bring me a towel.”

“And how did you get on?” asked Verney, when the girls came down. “Did you manage to sleep?”

“Oh, we slept. One cannot help sleeping when one lives in the open air. And you? I’m afraid you had not much comfort,” said Sonia.

“I slept all the same and in spite of myself.”

“I kept dreaming of those horrid men, with their dark, thin faces and wicked, black eyes,” said Darya. “They looked fit for anything.”

“Fit for anything but honest hard work, you mean,” he laughed; “but perhaps their looks belie them. They may be good, honest, hardworking citizens, after all.”



"They may," said Sonia. "And we may be dirty, unwholesome, reckless-looking ne'er-do-weels. But we aren't."

"I did the best I could at the little waterfall out there," he laughed again. "But the water was like ice and the soap was not sympathetic. . . . Ah, here come the brigands! Truly I would like to introduce them to the waterfall."

They made an excellent breakfast in spite of the brigands, who sat at the other end of the room, swallowing smoke and pouring it out through their noses by way of working up a good healthy appetite for more solid food, and gazing through it at the strangers like black-eyed basilisks.

The landlord brought in their eatables for the day, neatly parcelled up, and finally his bill, in which he had striven his hardest to strike a happy mean between what he knew to be right and what, judging by the appearance of his guests, it might be possible to exact.

It came to so small a sum, however, that Verney glanced only at the total and raised no questions, but, instead, complimented him on his catering and hoped he might come across him at some future time in a larger sphere. Then they took up their packs, and set off over the shoulder of the hill to strike the Frutigen road a little south of Schwändi, whereby they would be able to cross the Kander and the Engstligenbach before they joined forces and became a torrent.

Even apart, however, they were rivers of size, and, in order to get the girls across dry-shod, Verney found it necessary to take off boots and stockings, and, after an experimental journey in each case to sound for pitfalls, to carry them over in his arms.

It was another crisp autumn morning, with a feeling of frost in the air, and a sky less deeply blue, with fleets of snowy clouds whose shadows dappled all the mountain-



side with a wonderful hurrying chequer of light and shade, strangely beautiful in their ever-varying effects.

The higher peaks, when the sun fell on them, soared aloft among the drifting argosies more purely dazzlingly white than they, and of a visibly harder texture; but when the sun was hid, the cold white crests were not without a touch of menace.

They crossed the Frutigen road half a mile from the little town, and took a bridle-path up the slope of the Megisserhorn, which led them round past Fruitgen itself to Oberfeld and Loo, whence, until you came to Blatt, five miles further on, there was, at that time, no other village on that side of the river, save here and there one away up the mountain-side. Indeed, the only sign of humanity on that side of the valley was an occasional hay or cattle shed, and even these were few and far apart. At that time, too, the high road to Adelboden ran all the way along the opposite bank, and the track which Verney and the girls were following, on the left bank, was no more than a bridle- and cattle-path.

“Barring the little inconveniences of last night, I think we have managed things most uncommonly well!” said Verney exultantly. “The gentleman from Noirburg’s nose is completely out of joint. I hope he is taking it equably.”

“I have never felt so far away from everything and everybody in my life before,” said Sonia.

“Which, for the time being, is just what we are aiming at. How are the feet standing it, Herr Jack?”

“They are not troubling me in the least. This air makes me feel as if I could walk on and on all day without stopping——”

“Which, as we have to go on walking to-morrow, and the next day, and the next, and several more after that, we shall certainly not allow you to do. Gently goes farthest in the end. This is about the loneliest bit we’ve



struck yet. People do not actually tumble over one another in the Engstligen Thal, evidently."

"There is some one coming behind yonder," said Sonia, gazing back the way they had come. "One—two—I think three—people."

"They probably keep their cows somewhere up the mountain-sides here, and come up to milk them," and as they jogged leisurely on he told them of his home up in Warwickshire, and of his mother and sisters, and promised them warm welcome there as soon as they reached England.

"And Madame di Garda will come, too," he said, "and you shall see how cheerfully we manage to spend Christmas, no matter what the weather is."

"It is very good of you and it sounds delightful," said Sonia soberly, "but——"

"'But me no buts,' " he quoted. "But why?"

"Well, you see, your people don't know us——"

"Haven't I known you all my life?"

"Just about seven whole days," she said firmly.

"Is it possible? Now, I put it to you, does it seem to you as if I had only known you seven whole days?"

"I can't truthfully say that it does. They have certainly been seven very full days."

"Seven days!" he said with emphasis. "Seven years! A full apprenticeship to friendship," and if he had dared he would have liked to use a stronger word still.

But Sonia, happening to glance back, suddenly jerked out a startled—

"Mr. Verney!" and he turned, and they all stood looking back, and Verney's face stiffened somewhat.

"That's odd!" he said. "What can they be wanting along here?"

"It's a public road, after all," said Sonia.

"Undoubtedly—and an uncommonly lonely one. They



may mean mischief. They certainly looked capable of anything."

"I knew they were brigands," said Darya resignedly. At which the others smiled.

"All the same, we will get along towards that wooden house on in front there. If they mean nothing they can go on ahead. If they mean mischief the shed may be useful. Don't hurry! We have plenty of time," and they strolled on restrainedly towards the cattle-shed in front.

It proved to be stoutly built of logs roughly dovetailed into one another; the floor was, as usual, raised a foot or so from the ground; and there was no possible doubt as to the use to which it was usually put. The floor was strewn with dried bracken, and the not unpleasant odour of cows prevailed. There were, however, no signs of very recent occupancy, and the door was missing.

They dropped their *rucksacs* inside and sat down, the girls on the low doorstep and Verney on an outjutting end of a log. He lit a cigar, the girls each took a cigarette as a token of, or aid to, imperturbability, and they all sat quietly smoking and watching the advance of the three black-jowled Italians, from whom they had parted with so much relief at Warus.

"I believe they mean mischief," said Verney, when the new-comers had arrived within easy conning distance, and the blacks and whites of their shifty eyes could be seen; and the meaning of them, and of the quick words and grins that snapped from one to another as they came straight for the hut, left small doubt of their intentions.

"Get inside at the first sign of trouble," murmured Verney. "We can hold them outside for a year and they will tire of it before we do. We're provisioned for a siege, anyway."



The evil-looking three came striding on, the others sat waiting, quietly observant.

"Signor," said the chosen spokesman, in fairly fluent German, "we are poor men, anxious to get back home to our wives and families. Will the Signor help us on our way?"

This was, from the whole look of them, so obviously only a preliminary, that Verney replied at once, "Certainly not, my friend. The Signor regrets that his inclination does not incline him that way."

"Then the Signor will pardon us if we help ourselves," and the three laughed an ill laugh.

"Oh, certainly! The Signor will pardon you, but he will break your heads if you attempt it," and the girls went inside.

And only just in time! For, with a quick simultaneous movement, the right hands of the three whirled, and three chunks of rock came whizzing at Verney's head.

Three right hands behind three villainous backs, however, could hardly escape a keen observer's notice, and the only doubt in his mind had been between knives and stones.

The stones were not, therefore, altogether a surprise, and he was not taken unawares. A quick side jump, two heavy blows on the outside of the shed, and one more hollowly from within, and he sprang inside before the artillery could discharge a second volley.

"That's all right," he smiled at the girls. "Now we know where we are. There is no need to be frightened," for Darya's pale face was almost pallid and had a drawn, anxious look about it. Sonia's was pale also, but angry and determined, and her eyes had sparks in them.

"I'm not frightened," she said, with quick resentment at the imputation. "But I'd like to smash them, the wretches!"



"Keep well out of sight," he said quietly, indicating the corner nearest the doorway. "They cannot reach us here, and we'll take the offensive as soon as the chance offers. This stick of mine should prove a fairly strong argument if we come to close quarters . . . . If I can only get them apart and tackle them one by one! . . . . We can see more of them than they can of us, anyway," and he passed along the wall from chink to chink, where the inner casing of the shed had warped or fallen apart.

"Council of war," he announced. "Resolution as to cowardly tactics of enemy in taking to cover, carried unanimously. . . . Differences of opinion as to next move. . . . Feasibility of carrying the position by direct assault negatived by two to one. . . . I shall make a point of smashing that biggest fellow's black head at the first opportunity. . . . Brute's got a beastly-looking knife. . . . I covet that knife as a memento of the day's doings. Can you see him?" to Sonia, who was ogling chinks alongside him.

"I see him. He's the worst looking of the lot. I'd like to smash him myself."

Darya leaned silently in her corner, the weariness and pallor of her face showing plainly the laxing of her nerves—the result of her long confinement and the austere routine of prison life.

"Ah—ha!—more rocks!" as another volley came hurtling through the doorway. "Waste of force and ammunition, my friends! . . . . Keep well into the corner! They're going to try if they can reach us at an angle. . . . Idiots! they ought to know better, but their education has probably been neglected."

More rocks came flying in, flung from the further corner of the shed and just skimming the door-post nearest them. But no missile on a straight traject could possibly pass the door-post and reach the corner, so they were per-



fectly safe. The change of position on the part of the besiegers had, however, taken them out of sight, and Verney slipped across to the other side of the shed to keep them under observation.

"More council of war," he announced. "Bad language, I fear. . . . Faces expressive of annoyance, for some reason or other! . . . Impossible to satisfy some folks! . . . Oh, do something, my boys! We don't want to stop here all day, you know. . . . Ah, going round to the back, are you?" and he followed them round the chinks.

"Listen then, Signor!"—from outside the shed at the back. "You throw us out one hundred lira and we go away and leave you and the signorine alone."

Verney smiled at the southern acumen which had penetrated the girls' disguises. Sonia flushed with anger.

For a moment he hesitated—not for his own sake but for the girls.' It might be a cheap riddance of the rascals. One hundred francs was no great sum, and under their own peculiar circumstances the results of a scrimmage might cost them considerably more.

All the same, the idea was hateful to him. If the bargain had included five minutes' free play with his big stick on their truculent backs, he might have agreed.

"Don't do it," whispered Sonia, with an angry shake of the head. "They would only waylay us further on."

"Thank you!" he nodded, much relieved that they were of one mind in the matter.

"Will you do that, Signor? and we let you and the young ladies go."

No answer from the shed. Growling curses from the back. "*Diavolo!*" then, and "*Maladetto!*" and "*Sangue di Dio!*" and other remarks of a similar character, and they drew off once more to plot further mischief.



Verney seized the opportunity to pick up some of the wasted ammunition.

"There are two of them round here," whispered Sonia from her front corner. "They are looking for more stones."

And then a trickle of pungent smoke, stealing up through the flooring, showed what the third man was about. They were to be smoked out or burned out.

Verney saw his chance. The enemy's force was divided, and two to one—and the two only Italians—did not appeal to him as any great odds.

"Keep the doorway with your sticks!" he whispered, and, with a rock in each hand, charged out straight for the two in front.

The moment was propitious. Their backs were towards him as they groped for stones.

He hurled his first as he ran. It caught the bigger rogue between the shoulders as he straightened up, and bowled him over breathless and for the moment harmless. The other, a black little wasp of a man, turned and ran a few paces, lugging his knife out of its sheath at his back. Then he stood, poised himself on his toes, the knife above his head between his thumb and second finger, the first finger at the butt to speed its flight. It glittered in the sun and looked venomously deadly.

Verney wondered briefly where it would take him, and how far it would go in. It looked capable of going clean through him.

But he had small time for thought. With a quick whirling spring the little man launched the knife full at him.

Verney felt it strike the arm he had involuntarily flung up before his face, and then his thick stick crashed on the little man's round, black head, and he went down in a heap.

The other was just struggling dazedly to his feet. It



was no time for half measures. Verney whacked round at his black head also as if it had been a hockey ball, and he crumpled up and lay quiet.

There was a struggle going on at the door of the shed. Verney gave a triumphant whoop and dashed at it. But the last of the three saw him coming, saw also what had befallen his comrades, and turned and bolted round the corner as fast as his legs could carry him.

"That's all right!" laughed Verney between heavy pantings. "No casualties here?"

"No casualties," panted Sonia, coming to the door with a very red, excited face. "We beat him off with our poles—the wretch! You have made a good job of your two," as she glanced at the two quiet dark heaps beyond.

"I'm inclined to think they won't trouble us just yet awhile. And I suggest that we get along at once. We'll have to be content with the punishment they've got. We can't hand them over to the police, you see. It would mean delay, and explanations, and annoyance generally. So the sooner we're away the better. I'll just kick out the remains of that fire."

"They're not . . . dead, I suppose?" said Sonia, doubtfully, as he came back.

"Oh, I don't think so, but we can go and look. Hello!"

"Oh, you're hurt!" gasped Darya.

"I didn't know it"—but his left hand was full of blood, which was running down his arm.

"There!—your sleeve!" and he twisted himself round to look at it, and found that the flying knife had slashed through his sleeve and under-things, and neatly opened his arm just below the shoulder.

"I remember now, it hit me, but I didn't know it had gone through. I don't suppose it's anything."

"Take off your coat and let us see," ordered Sonia, and



he hauled it off, and both the girls started at the sight of the blood-soaked shirt sleeve, and said, "Oh!"

"Nothing of consequence, I think," he said, but he had a momentary cold qualm as he thought how it might have been if the knife had gone a few inches more to the right.

"My *rucksac*, Dolly dear!" said Sonia, and when it was opened she got out a pair of scissors and cut the shirt sleeve away.

"Now we want water," and she looked helplessly round.

"Just tie that dirty sleeve round it as tight as you can, and we'll go on and find the water. The sooner we get away the better. Thanks! That's all right. It will keep now till we come to a stream. But I promised myself that big fellow's knife," and he walked over to the fallen warriors and took possession of the bigger rascal's knife and sheath.

He briefly examined the broken heads, judged the injuries not serious, and went back to the girls, kicking the grass with his feet and evidently looking for something. He found it at last, close to the shed—the knife that had wounded him.

"Now—quick march!" he suggested, and they picked up their baggage and walked quietly on up the valley.

"Villainous-looking things, aren't they?" he said, displaying his trophies. "Will you keep one as a memento also?"

"Horrid things! As bad as their owners," said Sonia. "No, I won't have one, thank you!"

"I shall keep this one," he said, "and the other can go, since you feel no craving for it," and he jerked it away up the mountain-side and it fell with a clatter among the rocks.

"Not yet, not yet," he protested, when they came on a stream galloping down to the Engstligenbach. "Let us



put all the space we can between ourselves and our misdeeds first. It is quite comfortable, I assure you."

"We are costing you more than we intended, Mr. Verney," said Sonia regretfully.

"Not a bit! I mean"—he laughed—"this is really not worth speaking of. But they are nasty things, are flying knives, and anything but correct form. I wish I'd hit that fellow's head a bit harder. Just look at that now!" holding out for inspection the knife he was keeping. "Edges back and front, and both as sharp as razors. If the other one had come straight, I believe it would have gone right through me."

"Oh, don't!" said Sonia with a shiver. "I'm thankful it was no worse."

"So am I," said Verney, and jerked his thoughts sharply away from consideration of what might have happened to the girls if that other knife had gone to its destined billet.

That would indeed have been a woeful ending to their High Adventure, and it would not bear thinking about. And all three of them, though they said no more about it, were most devoutly grateful that matters had gone no worse.

"Well, yes, I think we may take a bit of a rest now," said Verney, after a good hour's walking.

They sat down by the next stream, and he bared his muscular white arm to the shoulder and cleansed it in the icy water, and washed the red sleeve so that it might be turned to account as a bandage. And Sonia made a pad of it and bound it up tightly with handkerchiefs—Verney's handkerchiefs, since hers and Darya's lacked superficial area.

"Does it hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"Not a bit—that is, hardly at all," he replied cheerfully, for her undisguised sympathy and the touch of her



soft fingers were altogether delightful to him. He would have suffered much more painful wounds with equanimity for the joy of her anxious ministrations. "It's a nice clean gash and will soon heal. Now I think we might eat a bite or two. So much active exertion makes one feel empty."

So they delved into their Warus parcels and found them equal to the occasion, and sat eating and chatting discursively—Verney in the highest of spirits, Sonia inclined thereto also, in the rebound from the late undue tension. Darya alone seemed weighted and earth-bound.

"I know," she said excusingly, when Sonia rallied her one time. "But I can't help feeling like a Jonah. Trouble goes with me."

"But it wasn't you those wretched men wanted, dear," reasoned Sonia. "It was just anything they could get out of any or all of us. They would have attacked anybody they came across if they'd thought them worth plundering."

"I know. But you wouldn't have been here but for me. You would be living comfortably at Unterhofen with Auntie."

"And I should never have met her," thought Verney to himself. "I owe it all to Darya." And he seconded all Sonia's efforts to cheer her up.

"Dolly dear!" said Sonia earnestly. "Don't think like that! There was no joy in life for us till you were free to share it with us. We are all happier now than we have been for years past."

"I can speak for one, any way," said Verney, smiling radiantly but equally in earnest. "Just think what a melancholy mad time I would have had mouching about St. Peter's all by myself. Whereas now—thanks to you!—I'm having the very best holiday I ever had in my life."



"Yes, it looks like it," said Darya, glancing at his bandaged arm.

"Oh, that's only an incident of travel. The joy of cracking those fellows' black heads more than paid for it, I assure you."

"I suppose there is no fear of them following us," said Sonia, scanning the lower valley intently.

"Not the slightest, I should say. They have had their soup and it disagreed with them. They'll not want any more. Let us hope it will have a permanent effect on their morals."

"More likely on their brains. I should imagine that stick of yours would make quite an impression on an Italian head."

"It's an excellent argument," he said, picking it up and swinging it in his hand, "and a very old friend. It's good old Irish blackthorn. I cut it myself and had it polished. It's the kind of argument our Paddies used to use very effectively at election times. "I'm glad it has been turned to so good a use on this occasion."

"I feel like a nap," he said presently, when his cigar was nearing its end. "But I think perhaps we'd better get on. There's no warmth in the sun to-day. We'll go right on to this village, Adelboden. There's sure to be a decent inn there, and we're all due a good night's rest. And I'll take the opportunity of buying a shirt if there's such a thing as a shop in the place. How are you for feeling, warm enough? It will be colder for the next few days, when we are crossing the high grounds. Woollen shirts all round would not be a bad idea."

"A very good idea, I think," said Sonia, with an incipient shiver. "It is certainly colder here."

"*Allons! En route! Marchez, mes enfants!*" and he jumped up, and they set their faces towards the head of the valley.



Though but a very few years ago, Adelboden was as yet a comparatively unsophisticated—though eminently charming—Swiss village, somewhat off the beaten track, and as yet quite happy in its own enjoyment of its own undiscovered beauties.

After their experiences of the previous night, the cosy-looking old brown wooden houses, and the ancient church with its outside wall-frescoes, seemed warmly welcoming to them, and they marched in with cheerful expectation of bodily comfort.

“There’s a shop! There are shirts! There’s a jolly-looking inn! *Allons, mes enfants*, we are well fallen!” announced Verney, in the highest of spirits. “Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we go up higher! We will take our good as it comes, and trust to Providence for the rest.”

They chose the *Post Hotel*, and were welcomed with the warmth of unexpected profit, for travellers were few. So the landlord made much of them, lighted the big white stove in the guest-room with his own hands, and promised them an extra good supper within the hour.

“It’s quite delightful to feel a stove again,” said Sonia, leaning up against the warm tiles in thoroughly masculine fashion. “I’m inclined to suggest two woollen shirts apiece, and the thickest procurable.”

“Three, if you will promise to wear them,” laughed Verney.

“Two ought to be enough. We have our cloaks,” and he went out at once to the shop, and delighted them there by the purchase of six of the warmest shirts he could find, the young lady in charge agreeing, with most flattering volubility, that they were just exactly such as the weather called for, and charging him a franc each above the ordinary with the most charming and disarming complacency.

She pressed other warm apparel on his notice also, and



he thoughtfully bought them each a pair of thick stockings such as the boys and men of those parts wear in the winter time, and hoped there might be room in the girls' shoes for their feet and their stockings at the same time. He managed also to get a roll of plaster to strap up his arm with, and Sonia insisted on doing it for him, up in his own room, as soon as he got back to the hotel.

They sat long over the table that evening, for the air outside had an unmistakable chill in it, and the little salon was as cosy and comfortable as could be.

They dawdled over their supper and lingered over their coffee, and even Darya brightened visibly under the genial influences that surrounded her.

"I would like to stop here for a month," she said longingly.

"There are better places in the world even than this," said Verney, "though I'm bound to say it is very jolly. Quite an improvement on Warus, isn't it? Still, I think we did wisely in stopping there. I feel now as if we had shaken off our friend from Noirburg for good and all. And the three little black men were not a heavy price to pay for that."

While they still gossiped over their empty cups, the landlord came in to expand his mind on the travellers, and naturally the conversation turned upon their next movements.

"Ah—you go on to-morrow?" he said, nodding ponderously. "For Leuk?"

"No, the other way—for the Gemmi and Leuk."

"A-a-ah—so-o-o! For the Gemmi! But you will find it cold walking up there, you know."

"For a time, no doubt. But we go towards the warmth."

"And there is new snow these last days."

"But not deep yet, I should think. How is the path?"



"The path is good as a rule, but it depends on the snow. But you can always return if you find it too much."

"Yes, we can always return."

"You go by Wildeschwand and Artelen, and under the Tschingellochtighorn?"

"That's the way. I hope the Tschingelcetera is not as bad as his name. If he is we shall probably return."

"Oh, he is not so bad if the weather is not bad. There is a new way by the Engstligenalp, but that is not for this time of year. You will find it easier by Artelen and old Hans Unger's hut under the Tschingellochtighorn."

"And who is old Hans Unger, and why has he got a hut under the Tschingel?"

"He keeps the path in order, *mein Herr*. That is what he is paid for. For myself I would rather live down here than up there. *Herr Gott*, yes! It is a lonely life."

"He is all alone up there?"

"All alone but for two, three goats. He comes down in the winter, of course, but, not once or twice, when he has lingered late, he has been shut up there for a week at a time by the snow—he and his goats all alone. It is not a life that would suit every one."

"We'll take old Hans a packet of tobacco and the latest papers," said Verney. "What else would please him, now?"

"A bottle of Kirsch and a tin of coffee, if I may suggest, *mein Herr*. He is generally well provided for a siege, you understand, but these things he enjoys and they will always be of use."

"You will provide them for us, Herr Landlord, and also provisions for the road—ample provisions and of your best, for this strong air makes one always hungry."

"It is good to be always hungry," laughed the landlord, "both for those who eat and for those who provide for them. I will see to it all myself. And if the weather turns



bad, and the Herren decide to return, we will welcome them with heartiness."

"'Life's warmest welcome's at an inn,' " misquoted Verney musingly, as mine host bowed himself away. "Without subscribing to the sentiment entirely, I'm bound to say this is an improvement on Warus."

"It is," said Sonia emphatically. "And I'm glad to think you won't have to sleep on four chairs to-night."

"And Master Jack here won't have to dream of brigands all night."

"I probably shall, all the same," said Darya. "I do hope your arm won't keep you from sleeping, Mr. Verney."

"I don't believe even it could manage that. I'm dog-tired. I suppose it's the effect of our little argument with the black-a-vised ones this morning. So—early to bed, early to rise! I suggest we breakfast about eight, and start for Mr. Unger's hut at nine."



## CHAPTER XVII

### PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES

NINE o'clock next morning found them on the road, with Wild Strubel and the Tschingellochtighorn gleaming and glooming in alternate invitation and menace in front, and the beautiful valley behind Adelboden drawing them round, every few steps, for another look at the long, smooth sweep of its green pastures and the glint of its many waters in the fitful sunshine.

"We will take it easily and steadily," said Verney. "We have a good day's march before us. But if we feel tired we can always break it at Artelen or at old Hans Unger's. A night with that old gentleman would be quite an experience, I should say."

But they had all slept wonderfully. Verney vowed that he had never turned over once, and even Darya acknowledged to absolutely dreamless sleep. So they were all in good condition for the day's call upon them, and pushed on cheerfully past the Boden farms, to Wildeschwand, and there they received a check.

Verney made light of it at the time, but, looking back afterwards, he saw how fateful it had proved. And always, when he pondered the matter, he wondered again at the strange correlation of events which elevated into determining factors in all their lives three villainous little Italian tramps—of whom they had never dreamed till the previous night—whose greed had brought them into momentary conflict with them—but whom they had hoped never to set eyes on again.



It was amazing. It was, indeed, infinitely and profoundly disturbing—to think that outside influences so trivial, so wholly accidental, should have been the means of precipitating results so direful, of bringing about a catastrophe beyond all earthly power of redemption.

They plodded cheerfully up the rise to Wildeschwand, and sat down in the little inn there, to drink a glass of wine with the provisions they had brought with them.

And in course of conversation with the landlord, Verney quite casually happened to say: "You do not have many travellers at this time of year, I suppose."

And the landlord made answer: "Not half as many as we would like, *mein Herr*. . Some days not one. Some days, as to-day, six before mid-day, but that is not often."

"Oh—ho! You've had a good day to-day, then? And who were the others?"

"Three black-faced Italians bound for the Gemmi——"

"Oh—ho!" said Verney once more, and looked doubtfully at the girls. "We passed three such on the road yesterday. I wonder whether they were the same. What were they like?"

"As ill-looking a lot as ever I set eyes on, *mein Herr*. Yes—I said to my wife when they were gone, and glad we were to see them go, I can assure you!—I said, 'If I met those three alone on the road I would get behind a rock till they had passed.' That's what I thought about them, *mein Herr*. We don't get very many of them round this way, thank God!—but even one's too many, and three's a good many times worse."

"There are some waterfalls worth seeing somewhere about here, aren't there?" asked Verney, discursively, as it seemed.

"Just up the road, the lower fall; and the higher, which is better still, is about another hour further on."

"We want to have a look at them. If we spend too



much time there can you put us up for the night?"

"We'll manage it all right, *mein Herr*. We don't as a rule, you see, but we can do it all right, and will do our best for you."

"You think they are our three, then?" asked Sonia, as soon as they took the road again.

"I'm afraid there's no doubt about it. And on this occasion discretion seems to me the better part of valour. What do you think? We came off all right last time, but if we should happen to fall in with them again we might not fare so well."

"Err on the safe side," said Sonia. "Time is of no consequence to us. We will stop the night here."

"Best so, I think. If we did tumble across them they might put up a better fight, under the double incentive of revenge and plunder, than they did for plunder only. Their heads haven't forgotten my stick yet, I'll wager."

"You don't suppose they've come this way on purpose to lie in wait for us, do you, Mr. Verney?" asked Darya. "Because if they had——"

"It's possible, of course," he said, thoughtfully. "They might have learned which way we were going, at Adelboden. But it's just as likely they're only taking the shortest way home, and have no thought of us in the matter at all."

But the bare possibility of meeting the black three, up among the wildnesses whither they were bound weighed upon him to such an extent that he made up his mind to procure some defensive weapon of longer range and more active calibre than his blackthorn, if such was in any way obtainable.

"In a case of ambush," he said briefly, "the attack always has the advantage of knowing what it is going to do. I will try to get a revolver and we must keep our eyes open."

"Couldn't we go some other way?" asked Darya.



"We could, of course, but it means going back more or less. And, really, I don't think there is much danger from these fellows—none at all if we are armed. They would bolt like rabbits at sight of a revolver, and I'd rather like to see them do it."

"You see," he said presently, with Darya's suggestion in his mind, "if we went back to Adelboden the only place we could make for would be Leuk, and then on towards the Lake of Geneva, and we don't particularly want to go there. We might be able to get across the mountains to Kandersteg and down to the Gemmi that way, but it's a long way round. I don't think you need worry about the little black men—certainly not if that revolver is obtainable."

So, as they rambled up to the higher falls, the shadow of the Italians lay upon them somewhat. And the falls, fine as they were, had a chill in them, and they were none of them sorry to make their way down again.

"Yes, we will stop the night with you," said Verney to the keeper of the little drink-shop, "and you must do your best to make us comfortable."

"You shall have nothing to complain of, Herren. We will do our utmost. I will light the stove at once."

"Good! Now, one other thing. Herr Landlord. Have you got such a thing as a revolver for sale?"

"A revolver, *mein Herr*?" and he turned from his fire-lighting and gazed at them open-mouthed.

"A revolver, Herr Landlord. And I will tell you why, and why we are stopping here over-night. Yesterday, down in the Engstligen Thal, those three Italians of whom you spoke, asked us for money, and when we refused they tried to take it. We had a little fight, and I broke two of their black heads with my stick——"

"Yes," nodded the landlord, "they looked as if they had sore heads. The Herr did very well to break them."



"They had knives. Here is one of them"—he pulled it out of his *rucksack*. "Another went through a bit of my arm. See," and he slipped off his jacket, and rolled up the new shirt sleeve and showed the bandaged wound.

"That was nasty business!"

"Well now, you see, Herr Landlord, it has occurred to us that it is just possible those rascals may have learned which way we intended going, and they might lie in wait for us up there. And so, if one had a revolver, why—naturally one would feel more easy in one's mind, you understand."

"Yes, surely! Let me see now! It is a revolver the Herr wants, not a gun? There are guns to be had."

"A revolver in preference, if it is procurable."

The landlord thoughtfully crammed the stove full of wood, thoughtfully poured in some oil out of a tin can, and thoughtfully dropped in a match, and in two minutes it was rumbling and roaring like a miniature volcano.

Then he turned thoughtfully to his guests. "There is a neighbour up yonder on the side of Mittag Horn who used to have a revolver, I know. Louis Schmalz his name is. He was out with the troops at Verrières, when the French came in during the war, and such things were to be had cheaply, you see. I will go across, if the Herr wishes, and see if he has it still and will sell it. I don't suppose it cost him much."

"I shall be greatly obliged, Herr Landlord. I am willing to pay any reasonable price, you understand; that is, if it is in working order and he has some cartridges for it."

"Of course, of course! I will go at once, as soon as the wife has started on the Herren's supper," and presently they heard him set off on his quest.

Madame, when she brought in their supper, was voluble on the subject of black-a-vised Italians, whom she held in the greatest detestation.



"Yes, indeed," said she. "There may be decent, honest folk among them like us Swiss, but they do not look it. The very sight of their dirty yellow faces this morning gave me quite a turn. They stopped here for a drink, and if my man hadn't been at hand I wouldn't have felt safe for my life. Why didn't the Herren hand them over to the authorities and get them locked up? It is not good for such to be loose about the countryside."

"Well, you see, it was miles away from everywhere, and when we'd done with them two of them were lying insensible, and the other was running away as hard as he could. And we thought they had only come after us for the sake of plunder, and would go back to where they came from. We had no idea they were going to travel the same way as ourselves."

"Well, it is much to be hoped that you do not run across them again."

"If that revolver is available, I don't mind. It is they that will do the running in that case."

"If Louis Schmalz will sell it, my many will get it, I am certain. He is greatly interested in the Herren, I can assure them."

And an hour later, as they sat smoking in great comfort by the stove, the door opened and the landlord came in with another big Switzer, whom he introduced as Louis Schmalz, and who lightened Verney's heart by the production from his coat pocket of a large army revolver, which had evidently just gone through a process of quick cleaning and oiling.

"It is all in good order, *mein Herr*," he said, "and I have here a dozen cartridges, all I have left."

"Quite enough, Herr Schmalz, for my possible requirements, though it is chiefly as a matter of precaution that I want it. And the price now?"



"Well—I thought—what would the Herr say to seventy-five francs?"

"Intrinsically," said Verney with a smile, "I could not truthfully say it was a bargain at the price."

"Well, perhaps it is a bit too much. What would the Herr say to sixty francs?"

"What would Herr Schmalz say to fifty?"

"A bargain!" said Herr Schmalz quickly, and laid revolver and cartridges before him.

"Is there any objection to trying one shot outside, Herr Landlord? It won't bring anything or anybody about our ears, will it?"

"Not at all. We are used to guns here, and there is no snow to come down."

So, after carefully testing its mechanism, Verney pushed in a cartridge and went to the door, and the report bellowed satisfactorily up into the mountains and down the valley.

"Quite all right!" said Verney, "and I am greatly obliged to you, Herr Landlord, and to you, Herr Schmalz, for being willing to part with your souvenir. Here is the money. You will perhaps join us over our coffee."

As they sat puffing with great enjoyment a couple of Verney's cigars, and sipping their coffee and cognac, he led Herr Schmalz to speak of the things he saw in 1870, when the French troops under Bourbaki sought refuge from their pursuers by crossing the border into Switzerland.

"A terrible time," he said, with deep feeling. "Sights such as I never wish to see again, Herren," and he shook his head meaningly. "It was in the dead of the winter, you know, and those poor fellows were half clothed, unshod, absolutely barefooted some of them, starving! Ay, like wolves, they were. If a horse fell, and they were as weak as the men, it was only bones that were left in a very few



minutes. Eighty thousand of them there were, and every one of them just a bundle of misery."

"It is past thinking of," said Verney.

"We, who saw, will never forget it, *mein Herr*—never! It is many years ago, but I dream of those things still at times, and see the hollow, white faces and the sad, hungry eyes."

They got presently to discussion of their route over the mountains.

"There are two ways, are there not?" asked Verney. "I think the landlord of the *Post* said something of the kind."

"There is a new way some take in the summer," said Herr Schmalz. "Right up the Engstligen Alp, and down into the Ueschinen Thal and across the glacier under Felsenhorn. But if the Herren will be advised they will keep to the old track by Artelen and under the Tschingellochtighorn, at this time of year. There may be snow, in any case, but the path is a better one and more easily kept."

"There is fresh snow up there each morning," said the landlord, with a jerk of the head, "but it should not lie thick under Tschingellochtighorn yet. If it should by any ill-luck come on thick, the Herren should make a push and get on to old Hans Unger's hut. They can always shelter there."

"Any accommodation for travellers?"

"Not to say exactly accommodation, *mein Herr*, but in case of need Hans Unger's would be better than the mountain-side."

"Well, we'll hope not to trouble him to any great extent. It must be a lonely life up there."

"He seems to thrive on it. But, for me, I like to have neighbours within reach, even if they're a mile or two away. At times old Hans has been locked up there for weeks at a time, and we hardly expected to see him again.



But he always burrows out when he's caught like that, and comes down smiling and happy."

"A philosopher, evidently."

The girls were very quiet, and Verney feared that apprehensions concerning the Italians were preying upon them, and possibly some also concerning the morrow's journey.

He did his best to set their fears at rest.

"Just think what a time we'd have had with those rascals yesterday if we'd had this little weapon up our sleeve! It's wonderful what a difference a revolver makes—to the man who's at the right end of it—and the man who's at the wrong end of it also."

"All the same, we will hope it won't be needed," said Sonia, with less spirit than was usual with her.

"We will certainly hope that, but, as certainly, we will put it to good use if needs be. And meanwhile it is a great satisfaction to have it, and we are greatly indebted to Herr Schmalz for parting with it."

"It is in a good cause," bowed Herr Schmalz. "If *mein Herr* will shoot all three of those Italians with it, it will be a great satisfaction to us. And now I have a dark walk, so, with permission of the Herren, I will be moving," and he and the landlord bowed themselves out.

"Please don't worry over those little wretches," urged Verney earnestly, as he bade the girls good-night. "The chances are a thousand to one that they know nothing about our movements, and that they are down in the Gemmi by this time. You'll see we shall have no trouble, and as we start half-way it will be an easy day for us."

But still the girls seemed burdened in their minds.

And it cannot be doubted that certain temperaments suffer at times from a shadowy premonition of coming ill.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### CATACLYSM

IT was another fitfully gleaming morning, with a sun that shone brightly at times, but a chill in the air all the time, as they passed hearty bood-byes with Madame and the landlord, and took the road up to Artelen, with good store of provisions in their *rucksacs*, for there was no house of call, save Hans Unger's hut, until they should reach Schwarenbach, close by the Dauben See.

Wild Strubel and the Amerten Horn and a dozen other snowy peaks gleamed and gloomed on their right, and straight ahead frowned their special obstacle, with whose name they had become so familiar in these last two days, the great Tschingellochtighorn, a name they were, some of them, never to forget.

"They are wonderful," said Verney, as they stood for a last look at the further peaks before the side of old Shingle, as he called it for short, shut them out of sight.

"They are deadly grand," said Sonia impressively. "I feel as if I had never been on quite such intimate terms with snowy peaks before."

"We'll know old Shingle here better still before we've done with him."

"I believe you're absolutely rejoicing in the thought of getting the better of him."

"Oh, no, we're only going round his shoulder, you see. To really conquer him one would have to go right up and sit on his head. And, after all, compared with the big



fellows, he's only a hill—not nine thousand feet—a mere hummock. Not even a pimple from one of your white clouds.”

“Hill Difficulty!” panted Sonia, as they got on to thin snow. “Big nails in one's shoes would have been no bad idea.”

“Why didn't I think of that now? And why didn't you suggest it?”

“Didn't know . . . it would . . . be so slippery.”

He took Darya's arm and eased the way for her, and they climbed slowly upwards, with a wonderful view back down the valley to Adelboden.

As they passed through Artelen they made inquiry after the three Italians, and were told that they had been there yesterday and had gone on, intending probably to stop the night at Bachen, where the higher path from Kanderteg joins that from Artelen.

This was quite satisfactory, and they pushed on with easier minds. As they slowly topped the ridge they made the acquaintance of another family of white giants—Lohner, and the Fisistock, and the Dolden Horn, and just as they took the winding path that snaked its tortuous way down to the Dauben See, they saw a man coming slowly along towards them.

With his head bent, and a large pannier on his back, he looked like a great, brown beetle crawling along the white mountain-side, now lost in a turn of the path, now emerging slowly into sight again, never pausing for breath or to look at the wonders about him, just plodding on with slow and calculated and absolutely noiseless steps, lost either in deep thought or profoundest stolidity.

“Master Hans Unger himself, for a ducat!” said Verney, as they stopped to breathe and watch him, and could make out now his straggling grey hair and long white



beard. "We shall not find him at home then, and I had hoped for a rest and a chat with him in his own house."

It was anything but a stolid face that rose in surprise to theirs, when Verney greeted him at less than a dozen paces from where they stood, with a loud and cheery—

"Good morning, *mein Herr!* Surely you are Master Hans Unger!"

"*Jawohl!*" said the ancient, raising first a warning hand and then taking his long, curved pipe from his mouth. Then he straightened up, and leaning on his big staff eyed them keenly, one after the other, through a pair of deep, steady, blue eyes. "But—gently, *mein Herr!* Yes, I am Hans Unger. And you?"

"Oh, we're just tramps," laughed Verney. "But why gently, Herr Unger?"

"When one's life has been spent among the snows, *mein Herr*, one learns the need of caution. There are cornices even about here where the new snow hangs by threads and a sneeze might bring it down."

"Goodness!" said Sonia.

"Yes, of a truth, the snow life makes for quietness," said the old man, and added with a patriarchal nod—"quietness both of mind and body. . . . Are you for the Gemmi?"

"We hope to make Schwarenbach to-day, at all events, and we had hoped to call upon you at home. We were also bringing you some small presents, Herr Unger—tobacco, coffee, Kirsch and the latest newspapers."

"That is rare and good of you," and the fine, old face beamed in every line and wrinkle, but especially from the deep, blue eyes. "And why?"

"Just out of good feeling for the hermit of the snows, and from sympathy with his loneliness."

"Rare and good of you, Herren!" he said again. "But I am never lonely."



“No?” Well, it seemed to us that you very well might be.”

“I have my goats, and my zither, and my books. It is a good life. None of us ever quarrel up there.”

“Happy man! A philosopher, too, without doubt.”

“Just the keeper of the path, *mein Herr!*” with a low, quiet laugh of contentment. “Will the Herren do me the favour of leaving the things at my house—up on top of the wood, in the shed at the back, where the goats cannot reach them. You see, I shall stop down there several days—a week maybe, and when I come back my pack will be heavy. . . . If it is not asking too much of the Herren?”

“Not at all. We’ll stow them safely away.”

“But that I have been back once this morning, I would return with the Herren. You see I met three men, about an hour after I had started, and their looks did not please me, so I thought best to keep an eye on them till they were past my house.”

“Ah—ha! We know those three men—black-faced Italians, who looked ready to kill a goat or break into a house as soon as think of it!”

“Those were the men, *mein Herr*. You have met them also, then?”

Verney briefly described their acquaintance with the three, and the precautions they had taken in case of a second meeting.

“I watched them well on their way,” said the old man. “They are not likely to climb that path again for anything my poor house would offer them. Would the Herren permit me to offer them the key, so that they can enter and rest there? It is only about an hour on from here, and it is a long spell still to Schwarenbach, and snow makes but a cold seat.”



"That is very good of you, Herr Unger. You trust us more than the Italians, then?"

The old face wrinkled and beamed again. "Surely! I have learned in my life to know a true man when I meet him, *mein Herr*."

"It is too good an offer to refuse. We have brought our dinner with us, and we will eat it in your house, and leave the key with the other things in the woodshed—and very many thanks for your courtesy."

"Not at all. I am still your debtors, Herren. And you have given me something better to think of than the other three."

So they all shook hands very cordially, and the old man when he had started on his way, turned again and said once more, "And remember to go gently, Herren!" and then he bent and trudged away.

"Beware the pine tree's withered branch!  
Beware the awful avalanche!  
This was the peasant's last good-night,—  
A voice replied, far up the height,  
Excelsior!"

laughingly quoted Verney. "It's exceedingly à propos, only our old friend would certainly have reproved the audacious youth for speaking so loud, when it might have brought about the very catastrophe he was warning him against. Surely, good, old Longfellow had met Mr. Unger before he wrote that. They must have had a fine crack together."

"He's a dear old gentleman," said Sonia, "and a credit to his country."

"And his hut, whatever it's like, will be better than the mountain-side," said Darya. "I used to love the snow when I was a child, but one loses the habit of it. I don't



think I would care very much if I never saw any more as long as I live."

"Well, you won't see much in England, anyway," said Verney. "It generally turns to mud in about five minutes—that is, in London. It's better in the country, but you can rarely depend on it even there. . . . What a sight that is!"—when at last the rock-strewn valley came into view, two thousand feet below them.

"Desolation!" said Sonia.

"A glacier-burst, according to Baedeker. I hope none of them on this side is feeling that way inclined."

"There is no glacier above us, is there?" asked Darya, with a startled look.

"No glacier, but a mighty lot of hanging snow. I begin to appreciate the true inwardness of Herr Unger's warning. Don't sneeze, my children!—or maybe you'll never need to sneeze again."

They went quietly along the narrow path, a mere line, a scratch along the mighty flank of the mountain, winding in and out of every fold and wrinkle—now in the gloom of a deep furrow where a noisy stream tumbled darkly through the fresh, white snow, and babble hoarse warnings at them, and looked askance at them out of the corners of its eyes, but was in too great a hurry after a warmer climate to explain itself more fully: and again, rounding a precarious rock buttress, where a single false step might send one rolling into the boulder-strewn valley below.

The path was never, in its most expansive moments, more than three feet wide, and was often less. Above it, on their right hand, the bare white mountain-side rose sharply to a huge bank of snow, which frowned down upon them like the barrier wall of a mighty fortress. Below it on their left hand, between them and the valley, was nothing but the long, rough sweep of the tumbled screes, which in their immensity were not without a certain sullen grandeur.



In places the path was no more than a simple dent in the slope, which swept down to it on the right and down from it on the left. In places it had been found necessary to cut into the upper slope, which then rose like a wall on that side, and hid the heights above. And in places it was roughly banked up from below, and the mountain streams brawled noisily through the openings in the deftly-piled rocks.

Something of the sinister harshness of their surroundings had fallen upon them. They pushed on in silence, Verney in front, Darya next, Sonia close at her heels, hoping at every turn of the path to catch sight of Hans Unger's hut.

And at last they saw it, not a hundred yards away, but had to look twice to make sure.

"What an odd little swallow's nest!" whispered Verney, for there was something in the atmosphere, besides Hans Unger's warning, which predisposed them towards silence.

Built in a niche of one of the cuttings, the roof of the little house continued the true slope of the mountain-side and came down almost to the path. It was indeed, to all intents and purposes, a lean-to, built against the rock wall in such a way that the winter snows from above should continue their downward slide without let or hindrance.

And that it was stoutly built, and had withstood many a bitter winter and many a blazing summer, its rich brown velvety colour betokened.

"Thank God!" murmured Darya, upon whose hypersensitiveness the harshness of the passage was beginning to tell. "I am tired. I shall be glad of a rest."

"Two minutes more," murmured Verney, "and you shall have all the rest you want."

The path dipped below the upper slope, and led straight to the little house. They could see the door in the end facing them.



And suddenly, without sign or note of warning, the whole earth and sky were filled with a sound such as none of them had ever feared to hear, a sound beyond all powers of description—a deep, hoarse rumbling and rushing—a muffled thunderous growling roar, as though the mountains had broken loose from their foundations and were crashing into chaos and dragging the grey sky with them.

For one moment—so terrific was the sudden change from the solemn silence in which they were walking, to this cataclysmic uproar, which stopped their hearts and then set them plunging till they were dazed and deafened—they stood stupefied.

Then Darya threw up her hands in wild dismay and made for the hut, staggering brokenly as she went. And Verney sprang back towards Sonia, whose blanched and stricken face seemed to him like the face of a stranger, and struck a cold blow at his heart.

There he could just see up the slope above, and he saw what she had seen. The snow barrier above had loosed and was coming down upon them—the whole mountain-side was crashing down upon them in wild leaps and bounds of mad, white fury—a miles-long sea of snow, rolling, tumbling, hurtling into the air, foaming up over its own ragged front and lashing out in vicious, long white tongues—huge slabs of chocolate-brown earth whirling amid the white—stones and boulders, half hidden in a cloud of snow-spray, rushing like a dirty surge in front of the bristling

All this he saw in a flash, and so close upon them was it that all hope died within him. terror behind.

Nevertheless, since it is not in a man to die without an effort, he gripped Sonia's wrist and began to drag her towards the hut.

Darya was almost at it, was within touch of it almost, when a venomous spear of snow and rubble, tons of it in



one long solid shaft, launched itself with a hiss down some small crenellation in the rock wall, caught her full, and swept her out of sight into the depths below.

Sonia gave one great bitter cry, and but for his hold on her wrist would have followed her, in an utterly vain attempt at rescue.

But it was hopeless. The flume, down which that fatal shaft had shot, was cascading snow and earth and stones across the path, and in an instant the crest of the avalanche rolled over them.

Instinctively, with no hope, but yet because a man still struggles for life in the very jaws of death, he flung her down under the rock wall, bruising her not a little, though she did not know it then, pushed her in close, and knelt above her, humping his broad back to the crashing death above.

Infinitesimally almost, the rock wall sloped in at the base—a matter of bare inches only, but a hair's-breadth makes for life at times, and here were inches.

He was buried in a moment. Rocks crashed down on him. One caught him on the head, and for a brief space he lost hold on himself and fell forward upon her.

Then he braced himself again and sagavely shook off the snow and débris that were covering them. And up above, and over all, he was still dimly conscious of that hoarse and deadly roar which sounded like the end of all things.

How long it lasted he never knew. Time, in such a case, has no measurements. Snow and earth and stones poured down on him, and when he got banked up tight, he worked, as in a nightmare, to loosen the strain. And ever he kept just a space above her who lay there white and motionless, and whether she was alive or dead he knew not.

After what seemed an eternity of dull dogged struggling



against the ever-accumulating pressures of insensate might, his head swam until it seemed like to burst with the strain, and he lost knowledge of things again.

But when he came to himself, he was still kneeling there, braced rigidly on his outstretched arms, and the dreadful roaring was stilled, and all about him was an awesome silence.

When he moved, snow and stones fell down on Sonia, but she lay without sign of life.

They were in a dim grey darkness. But he could still breathe. And coming slowly to his fuller self, it seemed to him that along the base of the wall the débris lay somewhat loosely, and he wondered dully if it would be possible to clear a way, stone by stone, and so get to the hut, if there was any hut left.

He looked down at Sonia. He thought she must be dead.

Her hat had gone in the struggle. All her soft brown hair was tangled about her head and face, and there was snow on it, and stones on her body except where he had sheltered it. Her feet were buried completely.

With shaking hand he cleared the snow off her face, and began to pick the stones off her body and feet, disposing of them as he could in the snow about him. When he moved his head and shoulders more snow and stones fell upon her, but the accumulation had formed a loose matrix about him, and presently, when all the loose stuff had come down, he found he could move himself in his hollow without serious derangement of its formation.

With infinite caution, lest disturbance below should precipitate catastrophe above, he began drawing out the looser stones that blocked the way along the wall, lifting them carefully over Sonia and stowing them away behind him, scooping up the earth in handfuls and pressing the snow down flat. And so, in time, the beginning of a small



tunnel, along the foot of the wall, shaped itself in front of him.

He was bruised all over, soaked with snow and mud, and dripping with perspiration, but, since he could still breathe with a certain freedom, he knew that his tunnel must somewhere be tapping a larger supply of air, and that cheered him somewhat.

He was doing the only thing possible, for the accumulation above him seemed as solid as a bridge, and there was no chance of outlet that way.

He scraped and lifted doggedly, till he could no longer reach without passing over Sonia's head, which lay towards the hut.

Inch by inch he worked himself over her into the little gap he had made, and, crouching there, worked on with feverish haste and yet but slow results.

But here and there he came on places where the capricious falls were packed less tightly, and was filled with exultation at each such find. Truly it was odd to think that his very soul should rejoice as at treasure-trove, in the mere fact of earth and stones being packed less tightly here than there. But treasure-trove is as varied as its seekers, and here each loose-packed hollow was a step towards life.

For very weariness he had to sink on his heels and rest at last, for work in that confined space and constrained attitude were trying beyond words.

He turned and crawled the few steps back to Sonia.

She still lay white and motionless. Her face was as the face of one dead, and a dreadful fear gripped his heart.

He bent his ear to the parted lips, and caught the faint sound of her breathing, and thanked God for it with all his heart. Better, he thought, to leave her so for the moment, for wakening would bring her only bitterness and



fear. So he crawled back to his work, and wrought at it with all the might that was in him.

How far he had to go he could not gauge. All he could do was to burrow on and on till he came to the hut.

He had been working for a very long spell, and had got many yards away from her, when, in one of his panting pauses, he heard behind him—

“O God! O God! . . . Darya! . . . Darya!” and he worked himself round and hastened back to her.

Her eyes turned fearfully up to his, as he craned over her head, and her face stiffened with terror. He did not know till afterwards what a terrifying object he was, all mud and sweat and blood from a cut on the head.

“Thank God, you are better, dear!” he said, in the fullness of his heart. “I am clearing a way to the hut. Just lie still for a bit. It is only a question of time, and I will come back every now and then.”

“Darya?” she murmured.

But he had no words to tell her then. Rightly or wrongly, he bent down and kissed her cold forehead and crept away to his work.

Twice, at intervals, he came back to her, and each time her eyes turned up to him in silent response to his coming, and then he crawled away again, and scraped and pulled with bleeding fingers, and rejoiced at so small a thing as a stone coming away easily and affording him speedier progress.

But, the third time he came, she was on her knees, peering into his tunnel, awaiting him.

“Let me help,” she said, and followed him back.

They made better way now, for he could pass the stones to her, and he showed her how to dispose of them. The larger ones she pushed and carried back to the place where she had been lying, the smaller were disposed of in the softer patches of snow.



At last, through the stones in front, Verney's fingers touched wood, and he joyfully whispered the good news to her. It was only the wood-shed he had come upon, however, and it took him still a long time and heavy labour to reach and clear the door. But working with the goal in touch was a very different thing from groping along in uncertainty.

He got a sufficient space cleared round the opening at last, and when he rooted in his pocket for the key, his broken nails scraped cold chills down his spine, and his hand shook so that he could hardly fit the key into the lock. And as it rattled in at last a frightened bleat inside gave them welcome.

With every precaution he pushed open the lower half of a double door, and they crawled safely into Hans Unger's hut.



## CHAPTER XIX

### UNGER'S HUT

**S**AFE in the hut, Verney's first irresponsible act was to fall asprawl on the floor and lie as one dead.

Every ounce of will-power he possessed had been exerted to its utmost, to sustain the tremendous call upon his energies while the need lasted. But the goal obtained, Nature stepped in and claimed her needed relaxation.

He lay utterly spent, and Sonia thought him dead. And somewhere close at hand, a goat never ceased to bleat anxious inquiries as to who they were and what was happening.

She knelt down by him, her face drawn and white, terror in her eyes, and an overwhelming sorrow in her heart.

It was she who had brought him to this—for her that he had planned and toiled so bravely and so well. He was a good and gallant gentleman, worthy of any woman's love.

The bitter tears streamed down her face at sight of him lying there so worn and bruised and broken—and all, she knew, for her.

With a sob, and a strange wild gesture of the hands and uplift of the eyes, as though she cast aside every consideration but one, she bent suddenly and kissed him—blood and dirt and all—crying aloud, “Oh—don't die! Don't die!”

And at that he moved, and presently sat up and looked dazedly round, and at sight of her suddenly flushed face he tried to get up.



"Sorry!" he murmured apologetically. "Hope I didn't frighten you!"

"I was afraid you were dead," she panted, with the terror of it still in her eyes.

"Very stupid of me! I can't think what took me." His hand wandered vaguely over his head. "I got some bumps, I think," and he got up on to his feet. Then one of them gave way under him, and he sank down again, with a twist of pain in his face which he could not suppress.

"I'm afraid that ankle's got a bit of a warp," he said. "But I never felt it till now. I'll rest it a minute or two, and then tie it up. It's probably nothing."

But he looked very white and worn, and, her mind rising to the necessity, she said with sudden peremptoriness, "Wait! Just sit where you are!"—and to his surprise crept out of the door. And possibly, in view of her late amazing declension from her own standard of seemliness, the opportunity of recovering her equanimity in the seclusion of the tunnel was grateful to her.

She was gone what seemed to him a very long time, but she came back at last, bringing his *rucksack* and her own, which she had suddenly remembered seeing on the ground in their first sanctuary. And, to her joy, the bottle of Kirsch, carefully packed among the papers and tobacco by the landlord at Adelboden, was intact.

She looked round and found a cup hanging on a nail, and asked in almost a matter-of-fact voice, "Have you a corkscrew?"

He had one in his pocket-knife, and when he had drawn the cork she poured out a generous allowance and tendered it to him. "You first, please!" he said. "I'm sure you need it quite as much as I do."

So she drank a mouthful and he the rest, and it helped momentarily to tighten up their nerves again, for they had been very close to death and had escaped as by a miracle.



But all that had passed, since she first came to herself, lying all alone in the dim horror of the tunnel, had been abnormal to her and enforced or induced solely by the urgency of the moment's needs.

The current of her life, and his also to a less extent, had been smitten with so rough a hand that for one dreadful moment it had seemed to stop, and then had welled up into unusual courses under pressure of finding its way. And now that the way was found, recollection came back and overwhelmed her in a flood of horror and despair.

She had been half-kneeling, half-sitting on the floor while he drank. Now as the ghastliness of it all came surging back upon her, she collapsed in a heap with her arms outstretched, moaning, "Oh, Darya! Darya! Darya!"

He was greatly distressed for her. But no words could heal so grim a wound, and he attempted none.

He sat quietly by her side, and laid his torn and throbbing hand on her shoulder, and soothed it gently, as a mother soothes her suffering child.

His head hummed stupidly yet. He felt one great mass of bruises. Every muscle in his body ached. And his twisted ankle began to pain him horribly.

He wisely let her grief have its way. When the first violence of it was spent he knew she would be calmer. Her convulsive sobbing beat on his heart, but it would do her good.

He silently told her of his sympathy by the touch of his hand on her shoulder, and sat quietly looking about him in the dim light, to see, if he could, what chances of life Hans Unger's hut might offer them.

As far as he could make out, the room they were in was the living room. There was a shuttered window in the side wall, which would probably look down into the valley, and a door opposite the one by which they had entered led probably to the old man's bedroom. In the wall between



the two rooms, and so serving both, was a good-sized stove, the funnel of which ran through the wall on his right. Another door, in the wall through which the stove-pipe ran, led, he expected, to the wood-shed, for it was there the goat was bleating plaintively from time to time. It had been vociferous when first they came in, but finding no attention paid to its cries had calmed down somewhat, and now only murmured spasmodically at intervals.

The roof and walls of the little house were built of pine trunks of size, built evidently with clear foreknowledge of what they might have to withstand, and the roof was further strengthened by solid pine-trunk props inside. It looked strong enough to stand anything, he thought. Both roof and walls were, he found later on, tightly plugged with clay or mud, then stuffed with dried grass, and stoutly boarded over on the outside and partly panelled within. There were cupboards round the walls, a zither hanging by a string from a nail, and a rough shelf containing about a dozen books.

He grew very cold sitting there in his soaked things. But if he could only light that stove, he thought, the little house would be warm and cosy enough. For both their sakes he must try.

He bent over the forlorn little figure and said softly—"I am going to light a fire, or we shall starve here."

She did not move, and he hoped she had sobbed herself to sleep. So he got up on one leg and hopped across to the side door, and as soon as he opened it, a little black and white kid came bounding into the room, stared at him with a pair of glassy yellow eyes, and made as though it would butt him.

The door led, as he expected, to an outhouse, in which was an immense stock of firing, and hay for the goats. It was a long narrow chamber, between the house and the side of the mountain, and all under the one sloping roof.



Between the piles of cut wood at the front there was a narrow opening for the goats to go in and out, and the stove-pipe ran up through the roof.

He gathered an armful of small pieces and hopped back to the living room, where he found the kid skipping playfully round Sonia and feinting at her with his little black head, as an invitation to a game.

He sliced a handful of splinters off one of the broken pieces, laid his fire as scientifically as he knew how, applied a match, and was cheered by the sight of the blaze.

But, as he would have recognised if his wits had not been so disorganized, smoke must have a vent, and the stove-pipe was sure to be under the snowfall. And so, while yet he was rejoicing in the outleap of the flames, the smoke came welling slowly out of the stove and hung thick in the room. Their supply of air might, he thought, be limited, and it would very evidently soon become a question whether it would be better to smother in the enjoyment of a fire or die of cold.

But he clung to his fire, and so hopped out again to the wood-shed to see if there was anything there that might help him. The kid took his ungainly progression as a game, and came skipping after him with wooden leaps, as though trying to imitate him.

There were a number of slim pine poles, twenty feet or so in length and straight as spears, lying on the ground, and they gave him an idea.

He wanted an opening to the upper air. Why could he not thrust one or more of these poles through the crust above and so make an outlet for the smoke and an inlet for fresh air. All would depend on the thickness and composition of what lay above, and he could but try.

But there was no room to handle his pole in the tunnel, and he sat discomfited on a pile of hay to think it out,



while the black-and-white kid butted at his legs and begged for more hopping games.

Then his eye lighted again on the black stove-pipe, and it seemed to him that if he could break it off at the bend, and pull the top part down, it would at all events offer scope for further boring operations against the crust above.

His twisted ankle hurt him horribly as it swung about, so he padded it with hay, and bound half-a-dozen pieces of wood round it with his handkerchief, and found it much less in his way.

By means of a chair from the room he got his hands round the pipe, and swinging all his weight on it, it came apart with a crash and landed him in a heap on the floor. The upper part of the pipe remained fixed in the roof, but he thought it likely that the rush of the snow slide would have broken it off up above, and when he thrust up one of his poles he found that it was so. The pole struck at once into snow and stones, and he worked it up and round and round, and rejoiced at every slow inch gained.

It was desperately hard work, wanting one leg, but flakes of snow and stones kept pattering down and cheered him on. If his progress was slow, he was at all events making headway. When he had bored to the extent of his reach, he stood precariously on the chair and worked away, and wondered what depth of stuff there could be up there, for quite ten feet of pole were outside the roof.

In one of his pauses for rest, he went back into the room, and to his great contentment found Sonia still sleeping soundly, worn out with sorrow and the undue strain she had gone through.

The roof was full of smoke, but it hung there, and he laid a few pine chips on the embers to keep his fire from going out.

Poking about in cupboards and presses to learn what



their resources might be, he came on a small lamp nearly full of oil, various neat wooden boxes, one of which contained flour and another meal, and in the bottom of a cupboard he found a coil of stout rope such as mountain guides use.

This came in useful at once. He cut off a piece and unravelled it, and so was able to splice a second pole to the butt of the one he was using, and could then stand on the floor and work from there with greater advantage.

He was so worn out that the weight of the two poles became at last almost too much for him. There must be more than twenty feet of snow above them, he reckoned, for the upper pole was quite out of sight and still snow came pattering down after each lumbering thrust. The kid had long since given him up as a playfellow beneath contempt, and had packed himself up and gone to sleep in a nest of hay.

He had just made up his mind that he could do no more that night, and that he must put out the fire and they must get along as best they could, when to his joy his upward thrust at last met no resistance. He gave his poles a final twist round and dropped panting into the hay alongside the kid. They would not smother that night, at any rate, and on the morrow he would enlarge the hole and do his best to make others.

And now that that weight was off his mind he found himself desperately hungry. He had eaten nothing since breakfast, and only first breakfast at that, and the terrible time between had used him up most wastefully.

He lit the lamp and filled a kettle, which he found by the stove, with the cleanest snow he could scoop out of the tunnel, and presently had boiling water, and so coffee, from the packet they had brought for old Hans.

He was in doubt whether to wake Sonia or to let her sleep on. But sleep, after all, is the greatest of restorers,



and wakening would bring back to her all the bitterness of her loss, and he decided to leave her as she was.

He could, perhaps, make her more comfortable, however. So he went into the back room, which, as he expected, was the old man's sleeping-room, and contained a neatly made bed carefully covered over with large, warm brown blankets.

He carried away a couple of the blankets and a pillow, and covered the sleeping girl with the first, and deftly raised her head and slipped the other under it.

Then he drew a chair to the stove and made a much-needed meal off sandwiches and hot coffee and Kirsh, and felt himself more his own man again.

In the bedroom he had caught a glimpse of his face in a small looking-glass which hung on the wall, and had recoiled at the sight. Plastered with mud and sweat and blood, the face that looked back at him out of the glass was the ghastliest object he had seen for many a day. Even the sallow, black-jowled three were refined and gentlemanly in comparison.

But, after all, these were the stains of honourable warfare, and, fastidious as he naturally was, the craving for food claimed precedence over all else, and they had to wait.

Now, however, that hunger's paramount claim was satisfied, he proceeded to remove the more obtrusive signs of the conflict, with the assistance of a tin basin and thawed snow-water, and a scrap of hard and unsympathetic soap he found in the bedroom.

His soaked clothes had long since dried on him. They were desperately uncomfortable, but at present he could do nothing to render them less so. The thought of a warm bath and clean clothes tantalised him as the mirage-lake does the desert wanderer.

When he rolled up his shirt sleeves he found that the cut on his left arm had broken loose again, and had been



bleeding freely; and considering that he had never given it a thought, and had been working for hours like a navvy, it did not surprise him.

When at last he felt himself somewhat less repulsive, he put out the lamp, replenished the stove, drew two chairs close up to it, and lit the cigar he had been looking forward to for hours past.

And as the fragrant smoke curled about him, wrapping him in that soft cloud of philosophic content which it is the special province of tobacco to induce, his mind found leisure at last to travel quietly back over the day's happenings.

The philosophic content was shattered for the moment as he looked again up that awful white slope and saw it rushing down upon them. And again, as he saw that murderous white shaft hurl Darya into the depths. Poor girl! Poor girl! Her troubles were over indeed—but not as they had planned and hoped.

He was glad Sonia was sleeping. He had seen the intensity of her devotion to her sister. Her suffering would be terrible. The longer she slept the better she would bear the wakening.

He travelled again the nightmare passage of the tunnel, and looked at his ragged fingers distressfully.

His foot, with its rough padding and bandages, looked like a bad case of elephantiasis. It was painful again, and ought, he thought, to be bathed with hot water.

But he was too dead tired. Even the cigar lost its flavour, and was powerless to dispel the heaviness of his thoughts.

Still, they were alive—and with a shiver he said to himself: "Suppose it had been Sonia who lay out there on the hill-side, broken and smothered under the snow—and I was sitting here thinking of her!"



And he looked at Sonia, sleeping on the floor there, and he said to himself with all the fervour that was in him: "Thank God! Thank God! To have lost her so, just when I had found her, would have been bitterer than death! . . . God be thanked for His mercy to us both!"

He cut off the lighted end of his cigar and dropped it into the stove, and stowed the other part carefully away, for his supply was limited, and how long they might be kept there he could not tell.

It might be days . . . Would they find enough to live on? . . . perhaps he should not have eaten so much . . . There was the kid . . . and as he was wondering dimly which would be the gentlest way of killing the kid, his head sank down on his chest and he slept.



## CHAPTER XX

### THE COOK AND THE NAVVY

SONIA was wakened from her long lethargic sleep by a cold kiss in the ear, and an inquisitive snuffle in the nape of her neck.

She sat up with a startled "Oh!" which was greeted by the intruder with a backward skip of four tiny pattering feet and a tremendous whimper.

It was all as dark as a tomb, except for one dull red spot, like a baleful eye, which was the lower trap of the stove.

She heard the heavy regular breathing of the spent man, and presently made out the chairs on which he was lying.

Her hands fell on the blankets which had been spread over her, and on the pillow, and she recognised his thoughtfulness, and was grateful.

Then all the recollection of her loss came upon her, and she drooped forward on to the pillow again with her face in her hands, sobbing, "O God! O God! My poor Darya! My poor, poor Darya!"

But presently she sat up again among the blankets, and pushed the tangled hair off her face, and instinctively smoothed it back, and drew her fingers through and through it, and grew calmer.

It was dreadful, . . . dreadful . . . dreadful. But it was God's will . . . and she must bear it. She wrestled there in the dark with her heart-break, and bowed herself again and again, in bitterest agony.

"God knows," she said to herself, "I did it for the best, and it has only led to this!"



Darya gone—and gone so dreadfully! And Verney there! It was she had led him into it all, perhaps to his death. There would be two deaths on her hands! And if she herself died also it would be only right and fitting, for it was she who had led these others to their deaths!

And through it all he had proved himself so brave a man, so perfect a gentleman. And she knew why—why he had given himself so wholly to her wishes, risking his career, his life, everything, without a moment's hesitation. She knew; she knew. And she bowed her head again, crushed with the burden that was too heavy for her.

To herself she scarcely gave a thought. Her bodily discomfort was great, her mental agony greater, but her thought was wholly for these others—for Darya, for whom she had schemed and worked since ever she lost her before; and for this gallant young stranger, whose frank eyes saw but the surface of things, while her own had been fully open to all the possible consequences.

She took bitterest blame to herself, and writhed in an abasement of the spirit that seemed beyond the needs of the case.

Their lives, indeed, were spared for the moment, but it might be only for a slower death. Oh that she had died with Darya! If that fell blow had wiped them all out together, that, she thought, would have been the best.

A dim sepulchral twilight began to lighten the darkness in which she sat. The kid, satisfied of her harmlessness and craving company, had gone to sleep in her blankets. She felt suddenly weak for want of food.

Verney's *rucksack* lay on the floor within arm's reach. She drew it to her and found some sandwiches and began to eat ravenously. The kid woke up by instinct and bleated loudly for a share. Verney yawned, dropped his stiff legs and heavy foot from the chair, and sat up.

"Hello!" he said, at the dim sight of her. "Breakfast



time? Wait a moment and I'll warm you some coffee, I made it last night, but you were so fast asleep that I thought it best not to wake you."

"It was good of you. The sleep did me good."

He got up and stumped out to the shed, and brought in an armful of wood for the stove, and set the kettle on it.

"Your foot?" she said, trying in the dim light to make out what made the strange noise as he walked.

"It kept bumping about last night, so I tied it up as well as I could," he said cheerfully. "You see the place got full of smoke, and I had some trouble in making a hole to let it out."

"And you managed it?" she asked, with a touch of hope, now that the food was giving her fresh life.

"Out there, in the shed, I managed to get a pole up to the surface, and that has given us air. I'll make some more holes presently. But, as far as I can make out, there must be at least ten feet of stuff above us, perhaps more—just there at any rate. Won't you come to the fire?" and he stumped over and carried the blankets close to the stove, and she dropped into them again and went on eating slowly in silence, while he bustled heavily about and talked on, as though in speech lay virtue, or in the lack of it sorrowful thought might supervene.

He brought in still more wood and a couple of handfuls of hay for the kid.

"I think I'll try opening that window presently," he said. "As far as I remember, the roof came well down on that side, and the snow may not be packed so tight there. If I can bore through it, it will be a benefit. Here's the coffee, nice and hot. Better dash it with Kirsch to kill any germs there may be in snow-water and mud. I'll get some more snow, and you can have a wash if you feel like it. I happened to see my face in the glass, and thought it was a particularly disreputable Guy Fawkes."



"Oh, let me get it," as he was going heavily out to the tunnel after the snow, and she jumped up and took the basin out of his hands.

"There is a large choice out there," he called after her. "Please pick the cleanest you can find. . . . Now we'll have water in five minutes, and then you can retire to Herr Unger's bedroom and make your toilet. Stay, I'll light the lamp, and then you'll be able to see what you're doing!"

And when she had gone into the inner room, he rooted about till he found a milk-can, and filled it with snow and set it by the stove to melt.

He was drinking coffee and munching a sandwich when she came out, and her neatly coiled hair, twisted round her head in thick plaits, Bernese fashion, and her general neatness, made him feel loathsomely rough and unclean.

"Now, you will please let me see to your foot," she said with quiet decision. "How is it hurt?"

"I got a twist, I'm afraid. It feels about twice as big as it ought to do, and very much in the way."

"We'll bathe it with hot water and then bandage it up. There are clean sheets in a box in there. I'll tear a strip off one. Can you get off those splints?" And he made haste to get rid of them, and was attempting to wash his foot when she came back.

"I'm full of mud," he said apologetically. "But I'll try and get rid of it by degrees."

But she dissipated the need for any such remark with a wave of the hands.

"By God's mercy," she said, with a quiver in her voice, "we are alive. We must do the best we can."

"Yes . . . I do thank God for His mercy. . . . It was a miracle."

"Can we . . . how long, do you think—" she began,



and the tears were running down her face and dropping into the water, and he knew she was thinking of Darya.

"We will root about presently and see what there is in the house. That man at Windeschwand said the old chap generally kept a good supply for just such an occasion as this. Though I should imagine this was something beyond the usual. . . . That eases it very much, thank you!" as her soft fingers bathed the swollen ankle and sent thrills up to his heart. "It is very good of you!"

"Oh don't! Don't!" her swimming eyes glanced up at him in reproof. "When I think of all . . . I have . . . led you into . . ." and a sob jerked out uncontrollably.

"Now it is my turn to say 'Don't!' You know it was my own very greatest desire to be of service to you. My only regret is——" But a mute gesture of appeal with her hand stopped him. The wound was too raw yet.

She bandaged his foot tightly and left it much more comfortable than she had found it, and in a corner she discovered a pair of old wooden shoes, large enough to admit the bandaged foot and a padding of hay. And while she was at it he begged her to strap up his arm again, as the opened wound caused him a certain amount of inconvenience.

Then, since sitting still meant brooding, he drew her into an examination of their resources.

They poked into every cupboard, box, receptacle of any and every kind, assured that old Hans would make no objection under the circumstances. And the black-and-white kid, waking up, followed them about and watched all their doings, with the intelligently inquisitive air of a child overlooking the proceedings of a couple of burglars ransacking its father's house.

"Ah," said Verney, offering to pat its head and receiving a pair of incipient horns in reply, "I remember wonder-



ing which would be the easiest way to kill you, young gentleman, just before I fell asleep last night."

"Poor little fellow! I would sooner starve than kill him," said Sonia.

"Here are flour and meal," said Verney. "I came on them last night. About five pounds of each, I should say, at a guess."

"This looks like . . . butter, I think," said Sonia, smelling at a couple of little stone jars which she had hauled out. "Made from goats' milk, I should say."

"What's this now?"

"Lard," she said, after smelling it also.

"Here's some sugar—not much unfortunately. And coffee—and we have what we brought as well. I wish now we'd been three times as generous to the old boy."

"Honey," said Sonia, bringing out six little jars.

"Cheeses," and he rolled out three little red cannonballs. "And, of all things—two—four—six tins of sardines. Sensible stock all the same, since they'd keep any length of time. And we have the bottle of Kirsch we brought up with us, and the tobacco, but I'm afraid that won't be of much use to you."

"Do you think . . . how long . . ." she began.

"The old man said he might stop down there for a week," he said. "So I should think that would be the extreme. If he hears about the slide he will probably come up sooner, to see how his house has fared. But I think we should be able to live on those things for a week. Don't you think so?"

"We shall not starve," she said quietly.

"Now I want to try if I can pierce the block outside the window there. If I can get those shutters open," and he hobbled across to try, with the inquisitive kid at his heels.

The windows opened inwards. He unbolted the shut-



ters, and to his surprise, found no difficulty in throwing them open. He climbed through, and found a considerable free space under the wide overhanging eaves of the roof, but his further outward progress was barred by the usual raw agglomeration of earth and rocks and snow, which covered them like a huge shroud. And here, as the sliding mass swept over the roof it had fallen into the open space under the eaves, and piled itself gradually into a tight triangular wedge of rubble, through which he would have to make his way before he reached the outer covering at all.

It looked like being a tough job, and he considered the idea of attempting some possibly weaker spot in the tunnel. But there, working space was very circumscribed, while here it was ample. So he got one of his pine poles, and worked it into the mass, with the butt sticking through into the room, and delved away at it with dogged determination, but without making much impression.

"That will take some hard work," he said, as he paused, panting hard with his exertions. "But if we can manage it, it will improve our ventilation immensely. And I've been thinking—if we can get a hole through, we might hang out a flag of some kind that might possibly be seen from the valley below. Something blue or red, if we can find anything. Would you mind having a look round among the old chap's things?"

He was rooting about the shed for a pole more to his liking, when he made two more discoveries and hobbled in joyfully to tell her.

"There's quite a good-sized box of potatoes in there, and a full can of paraffin. They'll be a great help."

"A great help," she agreed, from the inner room, where she was on her knees before Herr Unger's clothes chest.

He was hard at work, thrusting and gouging at the



snow-bank with his pole, when she came out with an old red shirt in her hand.

"How will this do?" she asked through the window.

"The very thing. Will you please slit it in two, and we'll hoist a flag on each pole, as soon as I get through here."

His one great desire at present was to keep her mind busy on no matter what—anything rather than let her sit with folded hands brooding over her loss.

She understood perfectly, appreciated the wisdom of it, and did her utmost to fall in with his idea without showing her perception of it. But she thought how very like a man it was, to think that any amount of work could stop a woman thinking. Was it not one of woman's cleverest capabilities that while her hands were at their busiest her thoughts were at their busiest too?

But even there, you see, he was not entirely astray in his hopes, for it was better even to be thinking such things than to sit brooding over the irrevocable.

Her face was calm again, but deadly pale, and somewhat set and rigid in its quietness, as though an effort of the will were necessary thereto. But there was a shadow on it, and her eyes were heavy with recollection, and set in such dark circles that he wondered more than once if he could by some mischance have struck her in the face when he flung her down so brusquely in the angle of the path.

"Are you anything of a cook?" he broke out suddenly one time, determined to keep her at work.

"I can cook, of course."

"I was wondering how we could use that flour and the meal. We shall finish the last of the sandwiches for dinner. Can we turn the other things to account, do you think?"

"I will see what I can do," and he plumed himself once



more on having found her work which would occupy all her thoughts.

“How about the stove?” he asked. “Is it all right for cooking?”

“Herr Unger must have done all his cooking on it. It will do! Where are the potatoes you spoke of?”

“I’ll bring you some,” and he hobbled out to the shed and came back with an armful, and when he had got her a basin full of snow, and she had turned it into water, she set to work on them. And each time he stole a glance at the sober face—beautiful beyond words to him, even in its unusual gravity, and apparently intent on what she was doing—he rejoiced at her quiet courage, and at the high spirit which had never permitted one word of complaint or apprehension to escape her.

That her heart was wrung with sorrow at her loss he knew, and his own heart ached to offer her such comfort as it might. But, while he knew all that was in his own heart towards her, and knew too that it was the very best and highest that was in him, he had, so far, no right whatever to take it for granted that his feeling was reciprocated.

Why on earth should it be?—he said to himself. Why on earth should she feel for him more than amplest gratitude for the little he had done for her?

Something more, very much more, would, he hoped with all his heart, follow in good time. But at the present moment he had known her—and she him—exactly thirteen days! It seemed incredible, for she seemed to have become as integral a part of his life as his heart itself.

Still, incredible or not, there it was, and no amount of amazement at the fact could alter it.

And he knew that if he essayed any attempt at comforting her, all that was in his heart must come rushing out



pell-mell, and what the end of that might be no man could tell—though perhaps a woman might.

In any case, her sorrow, and the strangeness and delicacy of the position into which Nature's rough buffet had flung them, set her for him in a holy of holies—a sanctuary into which even his most reverent love must not at present venture—a sacristy which even the fingers of his imagination should not profane. All he could do, for the moment, was to worship patiently outside the shrine, and—in his clever man-like way—keep her mind so occupied that she would have no time to brood, either on her loss or on anything else.

Her primitive housekeeping seemed to him to keep her busy enough. He was even inclined to rejoice at the difficulties she obviously encountered, as tending to distraction from less tangible troubles. And he found it highly satisfactory when, out of the corner of his eye, he would see her brows knit over some culinary problem, which would presently drive her to delving into the mysteries of Herr Unger's dark cupboards, and the discovery of the utensil she needed or something that would take its place.

But ever, behind her busy-ness and her apparent absorption, was a certain aloofness of spirit, a withdrawing within herself, which recalled to his mind the days at Unterhofen when, because Darya was there, he saw so little of her.

And now Darya was gone and he saw her all the time, and yet—Yes, somehow, he felt her further from him than ever. For in those days she did unbend at times and come out of her shell, and he could approach her with a light and buoyant heart. But now there was about her a filmy veil of reserve more potent against him than plate-armour of triple brass. He sighed inaudibly for the old delightful *camaraderie* of those first days on the road, and kept a most cheerful face withal.



"This stuff outside is about as hard as old Shingle himself," he said one time, when a long silence was becoming irksome.

"I wish I could help you," and she laid down her own work. "I'm afraid you're not giving your foot a chance."

"I'll rest it when I get through. The extra air and light would be such a benefit. But all the heavier stuff seems to have accumulated below the eaves here, and it's packed hard and tight."

"I saw a pick and some spades in the wood-shed."

"Good idea! I'll try the pick, though it's not a tool I've had much acquaintance with. But wood is no use against this stuff. Iron may make a better impression," and he was drawing in his pole, when she nipped into the shed and came back with a pick and a spade.

"Try to use your foot as little as possible," she ordered, and he thanked her and hobbled out to make a new attempt after light and air.

She heard him chipping away, and stones and rocks rattling down at times, and occasionally a hopeful word came through the window.

"It's pleasure to see some results, anyway," he called out. . . . "One pick's worth ten pine poles. Why was I never instructed in the arts of the pick and shovel? . . . I would make it an essential part of every boy's education. . . . Three month's apprenticeship to a professional navvy. I shall certainly move for the appointment of a chair at Oxford. . . . Why did Ruskin never think of that now?" and all the time the earth and stones and snow kept tumbling down outside, and inside the cook went on with her work with a gravely preoccupied face.

She came to the window one time, on her way to the tunnel to get a basinful of snow, and found him coiled up at the end of his new burrow.



"I feel like a miner," he said cheerfully. "And I guess I'm just about as dirty."

"I'm getting you some water to wash in. The potatoes will be ready in about five minutes."

"And I'm quite ready for them. I'll come out and clean up. This is good healthy work for the appetite. It might be worth while suggesting it to the doctors also. . . . The Navy Cure for indigestion, weak appetites, and corpulency."

"Splendid smell!" he said, sniffing appreciatively, as he carried away the basin of water to remove the signs of toil.

"I must beg of you not to look at my hands," he said, when he came back. "I've done my best, but they got ragged about a good deal yesterday, and it will take a day or two for them to come round."

"I'm sorry," she said sympathetically. "They do look bad. . . . I will mix some lard and honey, and you shall put it on to-night. It may help a little."

"That's very good of you. Those fried potatoes look delicious. We'll have some sardines with them."

"I was wondering whether we ought. . . ."

"How do you mean? With reference to old Unger or ourselves?"

"Ourselves. Shall we have enough to last until——"

"Oh, heaps, I'm sure. And I'm as hungry as a wolf."

So he got out a tin of sardines and rooted about for an opener, but could not find one, and finally attacked it with the large blade of his penknife and a stone, and made anything but a skilful job of it.

"I hope the old boy has some defter way of doing it when he offers a fish luncheon to the weary traveller," he said, as he hacked and gouged.

However, he managed it, in a way, at last, and they made an excellent meal with the help of their stale sand-



wiches and some slices off one of the red cannon-balls, and coffee.

They sat in a strange, dim, wavering twilight which filtered in from the tunnel and the opened shutter—a thin, green-white tempering of the gloom to which their eyes were accommodating themselves by degrees, but the glow from the open door of the stove suffused the ghostly half-light with a touch of warmth, which was very cheering and acceptable. The snow-light gleamed and gloomed in accord with a fitful sun outside, so that at times they could see quite clearly, and at times, but for the blazing pine-chips, they could hardly have seen one another across the table.

“That little fellow makes one feel quite Robinson-Crusoeish,” said Verney, nodding at the kid, who had spent most of the morning basking in the warmth of the stove at Sonia’s feet. “He’s quite taken to you. He only came out once to see what I was doing, and when some stones came down he resented it as a personal insult.”

“Perhaps he knows you spoke of eating him,” she said quietly, and the kid looked up at her with his strange glassy eyes, and wagged his aged-looking mouth reprovingly at Verney.

So anxious was he to keep her from brooding over matters—matters personal and general—that he compelled himself to cheerfulness, though his heart was sore for her. But sore on her account only and for that which occasioned it. For himself indeed—but for her sorrow—no compulsion towards cheerfulness had been needed.

If, by any strange and inconceivable combination of circumstances, they two could have been stranded thus together, without the payment of so dreadful a price, how his heart would have rejoiced!

He might not—not even under such circumstances, perhaps—have told her in words, hot or cold, all that was in



him: not yet. But he could and would show her that all his thought of her was of the highest, and that her confidence in him could never by any possibility be misplaced.

"I suppose your watch has stopped too," he asked one time.

"Yes, I forgot all about it."

"So did I. But by the light through that funnel hole it must be somewhere about mid-day, I think. We shall know when the sun sets, at all events. . . to some extent, anyway. In the mountains it gets cut off early, of course. Fortunately we have the lamp and a fair amount of oil. I shall make a bed of hay in this corner by the stove. Can you make yourself comfortable in there?"

"I shall be all right. There are more blankets in a chest. How many will you have?"

"Three, please, if you're sure you can spare them. I expect it will be pretty cold in the night, but I will try to keep the stove going. I'll do my best to get through that snow-wall before supper time. Shall we have some more of those delicious potatoes?"

"I thought of trying some cakes."

"Delightful! I shall delve away all afternoon in hopes of them."

He picked away under the eaves for a time, and then the urgent necessity of more ventilation at the soonest possible moment sent him prospecting down the tunnel, and presently he came back for pine poles, and she heard him hard at work some distance away. And just before supper time he came back to tell her that he had discovered a small patch of softer stuff, right above where the tunnel began, and, by means of two poles tied one on top of the other, had managed to bore another small hole to the outer air.

"So we shall not smother, any way," he announced cheerfully, and congratulated himself greatly on so vital though elementary an accomplishment.



## CHAPTER XXI

### A VOICE IN THE NIGHT

THE little flat cakes Sonia made, some of meal and some flour, were without doubt the most delicious Verney had ever tasted, and he said so in a way that showed he really meant it.

Of course, in his case there were very special reasons why they should taste unusually good. He had worked like a conscientious navvy all afternoon, very much harder than he had ever seen any navvy of his acquaintance work, he was quite sure. And then—could any cakes in the world by any possibility taste as good to him as these that Sonia had made, with her own hands, of flour and meal and lard?

She smiled a brief, and rather wan, little smile at his exuberance, and regretted that her materials had been so limited.

The remaining member of the party had already surreptitiously sampled them in the process of manufacture, to the extent of one whole cake, before he was discovered, and had, by a new light of almost human eagerness in his glassy eyes, and a ferocious gibbering of his pendulous wet mouth, given it as his opinion that hay and potato-peelings were not in the same basket with them. All through supper he grudged them every mouthful and pestered them with his anxieties lest he should be overlooked, and played to perfection the part of pet dog in a constrained family party. In his little unconscious way he was a welcome relief against the underlying note of tragedy.

It was when they had finished supper, and Verney had



melted a basin of snow, in which Sonia had conscientiously washed the dishes, and he had lit a cigar—with the anticipatory deliberation attaching to the fact that it brought him within easily-computable distance of an attack on Herr Unger's tobacco—and they were sitting before the fire for a few minutes before turning in, that Sonia asked, quietly enough, but with all the feeling of her brooding anxiety in her voice—

“You do not think there is any possibility of Darya being. . . not having been . . . .”

A sudden choke of emotion cut her short, but he understood, for that which had been troubling her mind had been much in his own also.

“I do not think there is any possibility of hope,” and he saw the slim, white, intertwined fingers tighten convulsively, as though a last faint hope died at his words.

“Poor girl!” he said quietly. “I’m afraid the most we can hope is that the end would be quick and that she would realise nothing of it all. She would most probably be unconscious and never wake. . . .”

“Her last words keep coming back to me,” he said presently. “They seem now prophetic, and they are, to me, somewhat comforting. When she caught sight of the hut, she said ‘Thank God! I am tired. I shall be glad of a rest.’ . . . And then the end came . . . and she is at rest . . . with God.”

He spoke very softly, and under great emotion. Sonia's breast heaved with suppressed sobs, and he knew her tears were falling.

“It seems terribly sad to us,” he said again. “But . . . all her troubles are over . . . and, for myself, I have the strong belief that the next estate is better than this, and that for herself we need not grieve. . . . The loss is ours . . . all the gain is hers . . . And we meet again . . . I am sure of it. But I’m a ton-



gue-tied man regarding anything. I feel very deeply. I don't think I have ever said as much about it before . . . And I think I may say now what I dared not say before. Even if she had reached England safely, I doubt very much if there would have been any safety for her there, except in perpetual hiding——”

“I thought England was sanctuary for all the oppressed,” she said, glancing across at him, with troubled, shining eyes.

“Only for political offenders. Almost all the countries in the world are bound now by extradition treaties, you see, and the only offences outside them are purely political ones.”

“So that if she had got there, and they had ever found it out, they could have brought her back here?”

“I'm afraid so.”

“What a horrible world it is!” she said, with a shiver.

“It is a very hard world when one offends its laws and prejudices.”

“You don't think she was wrong——” she began quickly, up in arms for Darya.

“I am quite sure she did only what she was driven to do. The horrible thing is that, with all our civilisation . . . and knowledge of the better things, it should have been possible for her to be so driven.”

“Russia is not civilised, and has no knowledge of better things,” she said bitterly, and got up to go to her own room.

“I do hope you will sleep well. It would do you so much good,” he said earnestly, as he took her hand for a moment, and looked so like bending and kissing it that she withdrew it hastily.

She shook her head doubtfully, and went into the other room.

Verney sat on before the fire, finishing his cigar and



thinking of her. As his eyes followed his smoke upwards one time, they lighted on a small object hanging by a nail to one of the heavy beams of the roof, and he jumped up and triumphantly unhooked the tin-opener they had been searching for.

He carried in from the shed enough hay for a comfortable bed in the corner by the stove, and the kid immediately started supper afresh on it, and was forthwith banished to the shed. But he loved society and the stove, and complained so loudly that he had to be allowed in again, lest he should keep Sonia from sleeping.

So, when he had replenished the fire, Verney tied him to the leg of the table, with rope enough to lie by the stove, and, laying one blanket on his hay, he wrapped himself in the other two, and was asleep the moment he put his head down.

But it was to be a broken night for him.

The kid, having by dint of importunity secured the stove, still craved society, and Verney's first sound sleep was broken by his efforts to attain it. The little beast tugged at the table leg till it grated along the floor, and then cried so loudly that Verney sat up all dazed with sleep, under the impression that Sonia was in need and had called him.

Whispered threat and menacing gesture alike made no impression on the obtuse one, whose embryonic intelligence or natural cunning had risen to the value of a voice that refused to be comforted till it got what it wanted, and in the end he had to be released, when he immediately pattered across to Verney's bed and dropped himself into it with a whimper of content.

Verney pushed him into a corner and rolled himself up in his blankets and lay down again.

But the full deep current of sleep had been broken for him, and he fell from one troubled dream to another, until



he found himself back on the narrow path again—and the whole mountain-side was rushing down upon them—and all his thought was for Sonia—and he cried, “Sonia! Sonia!” and came to himself sitting up among his blankets, with the sound of his own cry still in his ears.

And as he sat, still only half awake, he heard a voice in the next room, an intense urgent whisper—

“Darya! Darya! I am coming, dear!”

And the door opened, and Sonia came out into the dull glow of the fire, her eyes still misty with sleep, her hair all loosed, her hands groping forward, her face full of eager hope.

He thought at first she was walking in her sleep, and rose quietly to prevent her coming to any harm.

But she was not sleeping.

“Did you not hear her?” she whispered vehemently. “Darya. She called to me,” and she clutched his arm with one hand, and held the other uplifted, listening.

“No, dear! No!” he whispered back, and so absorbed was she that the involuntary endearment passed unnoticed.

“But yes! I heard her distinctly. She called, ‘Sonia! Sonia!’ I must go to her,” and she pushed past him towards the window. “She is down there, all alone in the cold, and she called me. I must go to her.”

“Sonia,” he said firmly. “You must not. You can not. Believe me, there is only death out there. It was I you heard calling you.”

“You?” she said, passing her hands wearily over her eyes and face, and gazing up at him in wonder. “Why?”

“I’m afraid I was dreaming too. We were on the path again, and the mountain-side was coming down on us, and I cried ‘Sonia! Sonia!’ and woke up in the middle of it.”

She sank forlornly into the chair by the fire, still gazing



up at him with troubled, wistful eyes, as though to assure herself that he was not saying it simply to soothe her.

And Verney thanked God with his whole heart that she was in the hands of a man who, by God's grace, was strong enough to set duty first, and that that man was himself.

She had only thrown off her jacket and her shoes, but the warm little shirts he had bought for her were open at the neck, showing her soft white throat, and her hair flowed about her like a cascade of burnished copper, and those great wistful eyes of hers might well have made a man lose his head, as he had already wholly lost his heart.

He would have given much to have had the right to fall on his knees before her, and reassure and comfort her with tender words and hot loving kisses.

But he had not that right—as yet, and he held himself with a firm hand.

“You are quite sure?” she faltered, with still a lingering hope in it.

“I am quite sure, and I am only sorry that I disturbed you so. It was very stupid of me.”

“I was sure it was Darya—and oh, I was so glad, so glad!” she said wistfully, and sat gazing into the fire.

“May I stop here?” she asked presently. “I could not sleep if I tried. But you—you are tired out. Please lie down again and go to sleep.”

“I will sit up and keep you company.”

“Then I will go——” and she got up from her chair.

“Then I will obey orders,” and he rolled himself up once more in his blankets, and slept this time without further disturbance.



## CHAPTER XXII

### TRANSFORMATION

SONIA was up and doing long before Verney woke. His bedfellow, the kid, watched her lazily from his nest in the hay for a time, and then erected himself and pattered after her in hopes of dainties.

She had the coffee made, and more cakes, and the table spread with butter and honey and cheese, before the motionless figure in the corner moved and yawned and sat up, and then jumped up with a spring.

"I apologise," he said cheerily. "I slept like a top, but I feel all the better for it. Too bad to have left all the work to you."

"It's woman's work," she said, and he was glad to see no sign in her of the night's upsetting. Her face was, as before, calm and shadowed, her manner very quiet and subdued.

"I shall break through there in time," and he nodded towards the window. "But it's packed like a wall, and there's an awful lot of it. Then we will hoist our flags. But we need not expect any very speedy response, I'm afraid. There cannot be much traffic along the valley at this time of year."

He toiled like a conscientious navvy all the morning, but the space was so confined that he could do not more than chip with his pick, and his left arm was still stiff from his wound, and the unaccustomed work tired him mortally, and so his progress was slower than he anticipated.

More than once the kid reared himself up on his hind legs at the window and watched him solemnly for a time,



and then shook his head and relapsed, with waggling jaw, as though he said, "Well, well, these strange humans pass my comprehension," and trotted away back to Sonia, and levied toll on her cooking operations whenever opportunity offered.

Verney was devoutly thankful when her voice inside summoned him to dinner, but when he climbed in through the window he got a surprise which nailed him agape to the spot where he had landed.

He had left in the hut a sweet, sorrowful girl dressed in boy's clothes, with her thick braids of copper-coloured hair coiled round her shapely little head like a coronet—to him the most bewitching little figure in the world, the touch of incongruity between the braided tresses and the rest of her but heightening all her charm.

But now—the beautiful boy had vanished, and in his place there sat awaiting him at the table a still more beautiful girl, in what seemed to him the most wonderful costume he had ever seen. He stood with wide surprised eyes, gazing at her as though she were a being from another world.

But she explained it all in a word.

"It is not that I did not like the other things," she said, with a quick and delicate perception, lest it should appear to him that she had discarded them at the earliest opportunity, now that the necessity was gone—and with them, perhaps, also something of the dependence and trust in him which they had betokened.

"But—they reminded me so——" and her lips quivered again at thought of her loss.

"Ah—h—h—h!" he breathed in a long sigh. "You are really real then? At first sight I took you for a beautiful ghost. Where on earth did you get them from?"

"I found them at the bottom of one of Herr Unger's



chests, carefully wrapped up in many papers. They must have been his daughter's or his wife's."

"It's a lovely costume. And she must have been just your size"—at which the shadow of a smile lurked for an instant in the corners of her mouth.

"One can always make things fit."

"It's absolutely gorgeous," he said, gazing with rapt eyes.

And, truly, it was. For the skirt was of brown stuff trimmed all round the foot with black velvet, though he could not see much of it for a fine salmon-coloured apron with dark spots on it which covered it to within a couple of inches of the bottom. But the gorgeousness was up above, where a short black velvet corset clasped the slender waist and came down to a long point in front. And this was studded up each side with solid silver edelweisses, with silver chains linking across from one to another. Round her white neck was a broad black velvet collar, with more silver edelweisses, and more silver chains falling from it to her waist, and between the corset and the collar a soft white frilly garment puffed out coquettishly. Wide loose white sleeves, coming no lower than the elbow, completed the costume, and with the coiled braids of hair coming close up to the forehead transformed her into a typically beautiful Bernerin.

"I must go and wash," he said abruptly, for the sight of her, so spick and span and beautiful, made him feel more like a navvy than ever, and his honest dirt became suddenly reproachful to him.

"Can't you find me one of the old fellow's fête costumes too?" he asked, when he came back, still feeling hardly worthy to sit at the same table with her.

"Why? You're all right."

"I wish I felt so, but I've washed off all I could. It's a tougher job out there than I thought. All the rubble



seems to have fallen inwards as it came over the roof, and now it's just a thick triangular wall of mud and stones, set as tight as if they'd been there for a century."

"I'm afraid you will hurt your arm and your foot, doing so much."

"They're a bit in the way at times, but I'll rest them when we've got those flags up."

And all through the meal, his mind was vaguely teasing itself as to whether it could possibly be a fact that her change of costume and restoration to feminine attire had wrought also some change in their relationship. And he called himself a fool, and argued with himself that if change there was it was wholly in himself—that it was simply her sudden dignity of attire that made him feel on a lower plane; for he enjoyed good clothing as much as any man, and knew the effect it had on one's feelings, no matter what ill-clad philosophers might say to the contrary.

But, come how it might, he was certainly sensible of—perhaps one might better say, over-sensitive to—a something different in her bearing, something so slight and subtle that the impressionable finger of his mind could not point to it with any feeling of conclusiveness—so elusive that he would not permit himself to believe that it was anything more than a figment of his own imagination.

The sweet young face, in its clouding of sorrow, seemed to him more beautiful than ever. The dark blue eyes in their misty circles looked out at him with the same frank confidence as before.

Did they?—quite? Or was there just a touch of reserve and withdrawal in them? Had her resumption of the feminine aroused in her a sudden sense of the defensive?

He could not make it out. What on earth had he done—except delve for her like a navvy—that she should creep back into her invisible shell by so much as a single thought?



It somehow recalled her to him, and even more strongly than before, as she was during those waiting days at Unterhofen, when life was empty for lack of her, in spite of snowy mountains, and the shimmering lake, and all the radiant beauty of the world about him.

What was it? What was it? Without for a moment admitting that there really was anything at all, his mind still chased futile explanations which vanished in the chasing and left no clue behind, while at the same time he did his best to permit no sign of what he felt to appear, and spurred himself to cheerful conversation and the assumption of an easy-mindedness which was not really his.

He praised her cooking as gallantly as ever, and showed his appreciation in the one way that proved it beyond possibility of doubt. For navvies need sustenance even if their hearts are a trifle ill at ease, and he had been spending himself without stint.

He teased and played with the importunate kid, who proved unexpectedly useful as a bridger of conversational gaps. He spoke hopefully of his delving, and speculated on the possibilities of Herr Unger's early return. In his unobtrusive way he exerted himself again to the utmost to keep her from brooding over her loss or the anomalies of their position.

And she sat quietly, with shadowed face and this new, and, to him, perplexing little sense of aloofness and withdrawal about her, and ate and drank, with evidently no great appetite and only as a matter of duty.

He wondered if she was going to be ill, and fervently hoped not, though, as he acknowledged to himself, it would, indeed, be little to be wondered at if her nerves gave way and prostrated her. Not many girls, he thought, would have come through so much without showing it more. But she was a girl apart, unique, not to be spoken of in the same breath with the ordinary run of girls, and his voca-



tion had brought him into politely friendly relations, with the highest in many lands.

"You have eaten nothing at all," he said solicitously, one time.

"I am not hungry."

"I'm afraid the limitations of the menu don't tempt you."

"One never enjoys very much what one has cooked oneself, I think."

"I wish I could relieve you of that. I'll do my best if you'll tell me how to go about it."

"Oh, no," she said hastily. "I did not mean that. I was only accounting for my want of appetite."

"Against my just imputations. But really—if you would allow me to——"

"Not for a moment. It is just that I am not hungry. Perhaps the preparation of food in some way supplies the need of it. It was just the same, I remember, when we used to have cooking lessons from M. Joannot. We enjoyed making the things, but never cared much about eating them afterwards."

"But for this visible proof to the contrary," he said, nodding to the meal she had prepared, "one might be tempted to say that possibly there were reasons. I remember the hideous messes we used to cook in the dormitory at school, and the gusto with which we ate them. It's enough to make one ill even now just to think of it."

From that he rambled on, through his smoke, to reminiscences of the stately old home in Warwickshire, where all the brothers and sisters used to meet for the holidays, and enjoyed the meetings all the more for the separations in between. He told her of his father, who was dead, and of his mother, but only of their kindness and large-heartedness and altogether goodness. And of his sisters and brothers, one thing leading to another, but, in all, his one



desire was to lead her away from herself and from the brooding thought which shadowed her.

She listened quietly with just a word or a question now and again, which testified to her interest, and was in some sort an acknowledgment of his efforts on her behalf against the shadows. And all the time he was wondering, wondering, what that little indefinable change in her was, and why; and calling himself names for letting it trouble him.

"Well, well, well!" he said at last, jumping up and straightening himself. "This is all very delightful, but it won't buy a new hat for little Tommy."

She looked up at him with a pucker in her brow, and asked, in a puzzled voice, "Who is little Tommy, and why do you want to buy him a new hat?"

"That was the formula," he said with a laugh, "with which my old chum, Peyton Barry, used always to buckle to work again after a loafing spell. Tommy and the hat are purely mythical. They represent, in a colloquial way, the golden spur." And all through the afternoon, as he picked away at the rough bank of débris in front, his thoughts dwelt on her, and he could find no reasonable answer to his questions. Except that it was woman's privilege to indulge in whims and fancies. But truly Sonia did not strike him as likely to be given to that kind of thing. She had shown herself so bold, so open-minded, so clear-headed, so frank—in a word, so altogether different from the girl of whims and fancies, that it was impossible for him to associate her in his mind with such small things.

Whatever it was—was the result of all his pondering and chipping—he was sure she had good reason for it. Things could not remain quite as they had been. The hearty companionship of the hills was bound to suffer check under conditions so different. So much had happened. Everything was changed—except his feeling for her, and that, he said to himself, would never change.



## CHAPTER XXIII

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**S**ONIA—swathed in a long white apron which she had made out of the remains of a sheet—excelled herself, as a cook, at supper that night.

During the afternoon she discovered a patch of perfectly clean snow in the tunnel, and so she made him some pancakes, which he declared were the most delicious things he had ever tasted in his life. And he had been working so hard, in hopes of breaking through the wall before night, that it was perfectly true.

Fried potatoes, and grilled sardines, and meal cakes and pancakes, he pronounced a banquet fit for a king—if, by any unlikely chance, the king should have been working half as hard as he had. And his enthusiastic reception of her homely efforts so nearly evoked the momentary glimmer of a smile on the sweet soberness of her face, that he would still have praised them even if the results had been very different.

He was somewhat at odds with himself for the slow progress he was making in his own department.

“Navy work is harder than I thought,” he said, looking meditatively at the blistered palms of his hands. “I see I shall have to reconsider my idea of the Navy Cure. It is undoubtedly healthy exercise, but it is also scarifying.”

“You are doing too much, I’m afraid.”

“Only what has to be done, but it’s a bit harder work than I expected. There’s such a lot of it, you see. And as soon as I get a block dislodged the stuff up above slides



down and packs tight again. But I think I'll get through all right to-morrow."

"Do you think there will be any chance of getting down that way into the valley?" she asked anxiously.

"I doubt it, but we'll see what it looks like when we can get our heads out. It must be two to three thousand feet down there, at least, and a risky business, I should say. We are quite safe here, and it's only a question of waiting, and putting up with the inconveniences for a day or two longer. One false step on a slope like that might mean instant death, you see."

"We will wait where we are."

"That is the wise thing to do, without a doubt, if you can stand it for another day or two."

"It is a small thing. I have been standing things all my life."

He dearly wished that she would have told him of herself as he had done of himself, but since that first necessary revelation in the boat on Lake Biemme, she had hardly said a word, and his own frank confidences had evoked no response beyond an interested hearing.

"If I'd been a girl, now, she would have told me all about herself from the day she was born," he said to himself.

But, on the whole, he very much preferred things as they were, and the magic of her actual presence more than compensated for any lack of spontaneity in the matter of self-revelation. Besides, he was quite conscious of the fact that his own effusiveness in this respect had been dictated simply by the desire to interest and amuse her, and take her thoughts off herself and her terrible loss.

He had a sound night's sleep that night, with no more disturbance than was occasioned by the kid's untiring efforts to secure for himself the most comfortable spots in their hay bed, and no more discomfort than was inevitable from such close quarters with a somewhat odoriferous and



exceeding self-willed little Billy, who knew just what he wanted, and threatened to keep the whole house awake unless he got it.

Verney was up and doing, and had the stove roaring in full blast, and snow ready boiling for the coffee, before Sonia came out of her room.

"I'm afraid you have not slept very well," he said anxiously, at sight of her face, dead white above the dead black of the velvet collar which showed above her apron, and the darker circles round her eyes.

"Not very well," she admitted, and busied herself at once with preparations for breakfast.

He felt painfully certain in his own mind that she was but a very little way from a breakdown, unless some change came in their circumstances. And whether the piercing of the outer wall above the valley would improve matters for them, he could not say until he saw how things looked outside.

But sooner than have her fall ill, all alone there in the hut, he was prepared to take risks and dare much.

It might be, he tried to reassure himself, that it was just the confined atmosphere that was telling on her, and that an accession of fresh air would act like a tonic and bring back her old self. And it might still more likely be that in this tiny place, with its narrow routine of homely duties, her heart and mind had so little on which to occupy themselves that brooding on her loss was inevitable, in spite of all his efforts.

If that was so, and he, by a word or two, could give them healthier food for reflection, was it not good for her—was it not his bounden duty—to cast aside the small trammels of custom, and tell her all that was in his heart concerning her, and heal her loss by the knowledge of a greater gain?

Perhaps—and his heart thumped double-quick time at



the thought—perhaps, by some unique womanly sense, she had already divined what was in him, in spite of all his disguisements, and was wondering and hurt at his reticence. And he glanced furtively at the calm pale face, and wondered if he dared.

If he told her he loved her, and she confessed to a like feeling for him, it would make things so very much easier for her all round.

But supposing—yes, supposing he was wrong, and her heart was already given elsewhere!—well, then, undoubtedly his speaking would only make things still more uncomfortable both for her and for himself.

And besides, his chivalric sense of what was due to her, under the strange circumstances in which they found themselves, held him back with a strong hand.

It would seem, to himself at all events, like taking a mean advantage of her. She had graciously accepted his proffered help in her own extremity—and here she was, cast, in unimaginable ways, absolutely on his care and honour—she was bowed and broken with her loss, and her heart was sore and heavy.

Could he—how could he—in simple honesty, corner her in that way, and, as it were, demand her love?

And how could she, under all the circumstances of the case, feel herself quite free to say him nay?

It was the quietest meal they had had. Even the kid's importunities were satisfied perfunctorily, and with scarce a remark. But Verney's heart was over-full, and hers was over-heavy, and commonplace cheerfulness seemed for once uncommonly out of place.

He would not let her provisioning pass, however, without his usual warm commendation, but he got up, as soon as he had finished, and said quietly, "I believe you are suffering from lack of fresh air. I shall get through there inside a couple of hours, I should think, and then we'll be



able to see how the land lies outside. If it seems at all possible, would you sooner risk trying to get down into the valley, or wait here till old Unger comes? With those ropes in the shed we might be able to manage it. I can't say till I see what it's like. What do you say?"

"Please don't take any risks on my account," she said quietly. "I am quite content to wait here—or to do just what you think best."

"Well, I'll break through, and then we can see what the chances are," and he climbed out through the window, and she heard the pick chipping away at the rubble, as she washed up the dishes, and turned her thoughts towards the next meal. It was well on into the morning, and the pick had jabbed and raked ceaselessly, when a glad cry came to her on a sudden delicious breath of cold clean air.

"Come and see!" cried Verney, and she went hastily to the window and climbed through into a blinding gush of light, which streamed in down the rough cutting he had hacked in the rubble.

He was standing at the open end, peering out over a breast-high parapet, which he had not yet had time to clear away.

As he heard her coming he drew back to give her room.

Then, with no more warning than a sickening quiver, the whole mass on which they stood crumbled under their feet in treacherous ruin; Verney's arm swept her violently backward, so violently that she staggered and fell—and as she fell her horrified eyes saws him disappear bodily. And then, with a dreadful, grating roar, the snow and rubble came sliding down over the roof again, tumbling past the mouth of the cutting in a grim cascade of earth and snow and flying stones, and blotting out everything but itself.

"Verney! Verney!" she gasped, in a voice that might have told him tales had he heard it.

But he was gone and she was alone.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### SONIA'S DESPAIR

SONIA pressed her hands tightly over her eyes and face, as though to crush out all remembrance of what she had seen.

But she knew that, as long as life lasted, she would never forget that last sight of Verney reeling helplessly down amid the disintegrating fragments of the treacherous ledge.

And his only thought had been for her! If he had not swept her back like that she must have gone too.

And better if she had! she thought bitterly.

Oh, why had he saved her? What good was she to any one? What use was life to her? Truly it seemed as though she brought only death to all who were dear to her.

Better far that they had gone together, and ended it all—he and she and Darya—all together in death as they had been in life—fit ending that for this most luckless adventure.

She was lying so close to the ragged edge of the ledge that earth and stones fell in upon her, and for some minutes she did not dare to move. But the dull rush and grind of the snow and rubble over the roof ceased at last, and she was thankful, for the continuous hideous growl of it was like a long-drawn curse. It gave her acute physical pain, and made her brain reel.

The sun shone cheerfully through the gap again, and she braced herself to crawl forward on her knees, testing every inch with the weight of her body on her hands in



front, till she could peer down through the opening onto the tumbled slope below.

He might be alive—and her anxious eyes swept eagerly over the long white slope, furrowed and disfigured with this new fall, and dotted here and there with darker spots, any one of which might be a body.

He was almost certainly dead—and she almost feared to look.

More than once she was sure one or other of the dark spots moved. And that was likely enough, as the tumbled masses of brown earth settled down into position amid the snow. But they moved no more; and all her anxious peering discovered nothing that gave her slightest ground for hope.

Any one of those darker spots might be his body, but she knelt for an hour straining her eyes, grown accustomed to the twilight of the hut, upon the dazzling slope of snow—dashing the water from them impatiently lest the lapse of a second should let slip a chance; jerking her head, with a strange wild motion to this side or that, at times, as the corner of her eye suggested a movement down below—gradually growing more hopeless.

Far below her lay the long stretch of the valley, silent as death. Across it, on the opposite slope, the serried lines of pines and larches stood sombrely amid the snow, like giant funeral plumes. And up in the clear blue sky the white sun shone as gaily as though no such thing as death existed.

But the white-faced girl who knelt in that ragged black hole in the side of the hill—with pinched brows, and eyes that looked as if they had suffered from blows, and little hands blue with cold—saw nothing but the tumbled slope below her, and it seemed to her like her own broken life and hopes.

It was the pain in her hands—the cold and her weight



on them—that made her draw back at last, and she sat back on her heels with a long hopeless breath.

She could not see a sign of him. He might be lying somewhere down there, stunned with his fall—only needing timely assistance to recover. He might be so broken that he could not move—conscious still, and with all his senses alive to the slow sure death that night would bring.

If she could only get down and search among the wreckage, and make quite sure that those darker spots were only stone or earth!

If she found him—well! If not—still well! For she could but die—on the slope where he had died, and so a clean end to the whole matter.

She got up slowly, for all her joints were stiffened with her vigil, and climbed in through the window and stood for a moment, while the kid came dancing joyfully about her, and told her how frightened he had been and how glad he was to see her back.

Then she went hastily to her room, flung off her gay robes, and, with trembling hands, donned her boy's clothes again. Partly, because there was in her dazed mind a dim idea that, if Death and Darya and Verney lay waiting out there on the slope for her, it was but meet that she should come to them in the garb they had known one another best in. And partly, perhaps, because those other things belonged to Herr Unger, and she had no right to waste them. And partly, without doubt, because they got in her way and were not at all adapted to the business she had in hand.

Then she ran to the shed, and hauled down the long coil of rope that Verney had hung on a stout wooden peg there, and dragged it through the room and through the window, Billy the kid dancing close attendance, and looking on the whole matter as a new and interesting game of romps.

She stood for a moment considering how best to secure the inner end of the rope. She looked at the table legs and



then, with sudden inspiration, went back to the shed and brought out three stout pine-poles. She bound the end of the rope round the middle of those as tightly as she could, and then hauled the rest along to the gap and flung it down the slope. The pine-poles braced themselves against the inside of the window, and when she pulled with all her strength they yielded not so much as an inch.

So far good, and her way was clear.

But when she crept to the mouth of the ragged hole and looked out, with full intent to let herself down by the rope, the sight made her head swim.

As far as she could make out, the rope fell straight for some fifty feet before it touched the snow, then it snaked away down for another hundred and fifty feet or so over the tumbled snow and rubble of the fall. But its whole length was but a span on the long sweep of the slope.

And as she lay peering down, she became suddenly conscious of the very strange fact that the merry sun above her head was dancing in a way she had never seen him do before, the rope and the snow-slope began swaying like a ship in a heavy sea, everything inside her head joined in the romp and began going round and round, slowly, slowly—quicker, quicker. She had just sense enough left to know that she was going to faint—and so to wriggle back a foot or two from the opening, and then beneficent Nature intervened and saved her from certain death.

When she came to herself the sun had danced himself almost round the corner. He no longer shone into the gap but athwart it.

She felt sick and weak, and cold, and cowed, and broken. Verney might be lying down there, needing only a helping hand for his salvation. But she could not go to his help. If he was dead she could join him, but alive she knew she could not. If she set her hand to that rope to go over the



brink she would go headlong, and she had the sense to know it.

She might, and did, call herself coward, poltroon, weakling. But go down that rope alive she knew she could not.

She sat up and shivered. She wept weak tears. Then, without daring to look out again, she crept back to the window and squeezed in below the pine-poles. She staggered to her bed and fell on it, void of hope or care or feeling, careless alike of life or death, wishful only for rest and a quick and quiet ending.



## CHAPTER XXV

### PURGATORY

VERNEY'S first thought, when he felt the ledge giving way beneath him, was, as we know, for Sonia. He swept her back into safety with his arm, and then tried to clutch at anything that might save him from falling.

But the first snow slide, which had entombed them, as it fell off the roof had banked up on the pathway and then projected gradually beyond it, forming an overhanging cornice, which had all hung together until his mining operations loosened the texture of the whole. This accounted for the amount of stuff he had had to pick through, and for the weakness of his platform as soon as he had got out beyond solid earth.

And so, as he went down, his arms, clutching wildly for something stable to hold on to, lighted on nothing but masses of falling snow and rubble, and he went down with them. His first bump was into snow which had fallen from the cornice, and was comparatively a soft one. But the fall had been a long one and the slope was sharp. Before he had recovered from his surprise at being still alive, he found himself bounding through the air like a football. Instinctively he took a long breath and wondered, in a grotesque flash, what the next bump would be like.

Snow again, providentially—snow slightly hardened on top by the action of sun and frost, but not yet turned to ice. His body dented it, and all the wind was knocked out of him.



Then he was flying through the air again, bruised somewhat and breathless, and with an intense desire towards hysterical laughter, which he knew he must check or he could not hold in his breath for the next bump.

He also remembered, afterwards, wondering what length of leap he was taking. Something tremendous, he was sure, for the time between each bump seemed so long that a thousand scenes out of the past flashed through his brain like the whirl of a mad cinematograph.

But the cinematograph shut off suddenly at the next bump. Rocks and stones from above had been whirling down alongside him, and it was probably one of these that caught him on the head as he fell that time, for all the following leaps were taken without sense or knowledge.

Even the final smash against a huge outcropping boulder, fortunately coated with snow, was unfelt by him.

When he recovered his senses he found himself deep in a snow drift which rose a good ten feet above his head, and he lay there looking up, through the hole he had made, at the blue sky above, and wondering in a dazed way, however he came to be there.

But as his wits got slowly to work again, he remembered bit by bit, and presently he was feeling gingerly over his limbs for damages. Right arm?—he could stretch it out by degrees, though it felt as if it had been through a mangle. Left arm?—the same, only very sore about the cut, which he thought had probably burst open again.

But what was this? His sight went suddenly all red and misty. Blood pumping out from a huge gash in the forehead—snow all red below him. He remembered reading, somewhere or other, of some Alpine climber who had undergone just such an experience as this. And he had plastered his wound with snow. So—a handful clamped on to the cut, and the bleeding lessened, and the cold was grateful to his throbbing head.



Left leg?—seemingly all right, as far as bones went, but very sore at the ankle. Right leg?—all right, for he was standing up now and nothing seemed to give.

It was marvellous; more—providential! Standing there in his hole, buried in the snow, his hand went over his eyes as it would in church, and he thanked God from the bottom of his heart for this second gift of life when death had seemed his certain portion.

And now to get out, and see what the prospects were of getting back, for Sonia must be in a dreadful state up there—all alone, and left alone in so startling a fashion.

It was no easy matter, however, to compass the first step towards getting out of the drift, for the under snow was soft enough to break loosely under him wherever he tried to climb.

But his wallowings and plunging brought him in time to the side of the great boulder from which he had rebounded in his fall, and he climbed cautiously up its rough side until he was above the drift and could look about him.

His first anxious look was up at the gap out of which he had come, and there was no difficulty in locating it. He could trace the path by the hanging cornice, and there, in the middle of the huge slice that had fallen away, was the ragged black hole up to which he must climb in order to get back to Sonia.

He reckoned it at four hundred or five hundred feet, and scanned the slope between with anxious eyes; for coming down had been one thing, but going up would be a very different business. And, though he believed none of his bones were broken, he was very sorely bruised, and from the state of his burrow in the drift he must have lost much blood.

He let himself cautiously down the bare side of his rock and started to crawl up the slope.



For a long distance it was a very purgatory of a crawl, and he thought vaguely of holy men in the far east, whom he had seen crawling like this on pilgrimages to distant shrines.

His shrine was up there in that ragged black gap, and inside it was his goddess, and the thought of her spurred him on over all the blind, insensate difficulties of the way.

A very purgatory of a crawl! His hands were raw yet from their first day's work of tunnelling to the hut. In places he had to scrape foot-holds with them in the frozen surface of the snow, and very soon each little ledge was stained with his blood.

The sunshine beat up into his face off the snow with a blinding glare that made his head reel at times. And then he clapped handfuls of snow on it to cool it, and took an occasional mouthful to slake his parched throat.

And once he slipped, and rolled down a score of yards before his bleeding hands could anchor him again. But the red ledges were still there, and he remounted them with extra caution.

When next he slipped, he sat down before re-starting, and managed with difficulty to get off his one soddened boot and stocking, and put them on again with the stocking outside to give him better foothold. The sprained foot had only a stocking on to begin with, but that foot was very painful and more of a hindrance than a help.

It was terribly hard work; and at times he lay flat for a spell to pant himself into shape again. But he was determined to get there, though it wore his fingers to rags and left him only bones where fingers ought to be. For Sonia was up there alone, and she must be suffering agonies.

So on he went, doggedly defiant of pain and wounds, till at last he came on the fallen snow and earth of that day's slide, and then it was somewhat easier going.



How he would ever be able to mount the broken cornice he had not yet had time to decide. When he got near would be time enough for that.

It took him hours to conquer the first two hundred feet, and the sun was well round to his left before he reached the new-fallen snow. Presently it would be behind the mountains, and he would be in the shade. It would be very cold then, and if he did not manage to get up into that black hole before night he would most certainly be dead before morning.

And as he sat, with that in his mind, and yet rested perforce because he felt so spent, his eye lighted suddenly on a thin yellow line which seemed to issue from the black hole above and run down towards him.

He sat up eagerly and gazed intently. Could it be a rope? It looked uncommonly like it. And if it was, his greatest difficulty of the cornice was as good as solved.

He turned and crawled on with new hope, and before long he came on the end of the rope. With a gasp of joy he gripped it, and kissed it as if it had been Sonia herself.

Clever girl! Wonderful girl! If, now, she had only fixed it properly up above, so that it would bear his weight!

He tried it and it stood. He hauled himself along by it, and that last hundred and fifty feet was child's play compared with what had gone before.

And so, at last, he stood under the cornice, with not more than another fifty feet between him and heaven. And the sun had gone round the corner, and the wind whistled coldly through him as he stood there, panting, and dripping with perspiration.

If the drop from the ledge had been sheer from an overhanging cornice, as it had seemed to Sonia, who had not dared to put her head right outside, he doubted if he could have managed it. But the rope hung down the furrowed side of the fall, and it was simply a question of haul-



ing himself up like a cliff climber, with his feet pacing up the perpendicular wall.

The last three feet or so, where the rope lay tight into the broken ledge, were the worst, and once he hung panting at right angles to the slope, and doubted if he would be able to manage it.

But he worked himself up, inch by inch, until he could grip the rope above the ledge, and then he was all right.

He drew himself in with a fervent "Thank God!" and fell senseless in the cutting.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### HEARTS INSURGENT

**S**ONIA had lain on her bed, spent and broken, without a hope of ever seeing Verney again.

But after lying so for a long blank time, she burst suddenly into most violent weeping.

"Oh, better so! Better so! Better so!" she sobbed, and continued so to sob, as though in words so hopeless she found some anodyne for her wounded spirit.

How long she had lain in that gray twilight of the soul, without a single hope for the future, and too bruised and broken even to regret the past, she did not know. She had no slightest desire ever to rise again. If she could just lie there and let the broken threads slip quietly out of her hands, she would ask nothing more.

Life had been, of late years, one long perplexing problem. She had, according to her lights, and to the very best of her powers, and with no thought for herself, been fighting forces that had proved too strong for her. She was beaten and broken. She had no wish to live.

Her mind wandered back to the early days, when she and Darya and Louis played on the shores of the Sound near Viborg, and were happy as the day was long. They were all very close in years, but she had always been the leader, and many a wild dance she had led them, and into many a scrape which drove even their level-headed English governess to distraction.

Then, before they knew it, Darya had grown up into a beauty, and Governor Pesthel came into their lives, for



their shadowing and breaking. And since then—just one long fight with circumstances that were always too strong for her. . . .

And then, as though to revive her broken faith in mankind before the curtain fell, Verney had come into her life like a bright shaft of sunlight on a wintry day, and she knew that his heart had gone out to her, and that it was a heart of gold and worth the best that any woman could give.

And she? Ah, she would have asked no more of life—if only things had been different.

And he was lying dead out there in the snow on that dreadful slope—with Darya. And it was all her doing.

“Better so! Better so!” she moaned, and wished she had had the courage to fling herself out and join them in their long white sleep under the snow. “Better so! Better so!”

The little room had grown almost dark. She lay in the chill misery of absolute abandon. The stove had burned down to a handful of red embers, and the cold mountain wind swept in through the gap and the open window and whuffed up the hole in the roof of the shed.

It set the window in the other room creaking—creak—creak—creak—as though the spirit of Death, which crouched out there on the mountain-side, were trying to get through.

And she would welcome him—ah, how gladly she would welcome him! He would just touch her with his icy finger and all her troubles would be over, and she would meet them all again—her mother and father—and Darya—and Verney. Verney seemed to have no doubt about it and there was wondrous comfort in the thought.

Creak—creak—creak—went the window in the other room. “Death is coming! He is crawling up the rope,”



she whispered to herself. "Come, Death! Sweet Death! Oh, come quickly!"

The kid came whirling into her room and pranced about, all abristle with fear. He did not like that creaking.

She called him softly, and he pattered to the bedside and stood up on his hind legs and poked his head at her.

Then the window frame gave one culminating creak, and the pine-poles fell with a clatter which jerked Sonia into a sitting posture on her bed.

It was all very well for Death to come, but why should he come so noisily?

And as she sat there, startled and trembling, she heard the fall of a heavy body outside the window, and her straining ears caught the gasp with which Verney came back from death to life. She jumped off the bed, and ran trembling to the window, and saw him lying there in the gap, apparently lifeless.

Her wits were all ajee. He was dead. But in some miraculous fashion his body had been brought back to her. How, she did not know. But there it was, and that was enough.

She scrambled through the window and fell on her knees beside him, crying, "Oh, my dear love! Are you dead? Are you dead?" and she kissed him, and sobbed over him, and stroked his wet hair, and called to him, "Verney! Verney! . . . Oh, my dear one! My dear one!"—as though the voice of love could call death back to life.

And to Verney, struggling back through whirling black brain-clouds, it was like heaven to hear her heart's clear speaking, and to feel her hot kisses and the soft touch of her hands.

He opened his eyes and lay looking up at her, and she drew back amazed, and all the fire went out of her face and left it stony cold.



"I thought you were dead," she gasped, and drew still further from him as he struggled up on his elbow.

"I was, nearly . . . I should have been but for you. . . . Your rope got me here. Your kisses brought me back to life . . . Dearest, you give me my heart's desire——"

"Oh, don't! Don't!" she whispered vehemently, and hid her face in her hands, and crushed herself back against the rough wall of the cutting.

"Why . . . Sonia, dearest! . . . You are not sorry that I know . . ." He was sitting up now. He tried to draw her hands down from her face. "Dear, I have loved you with my whole heart ever since that very first day . . ."

"Oh, don't! Don't! . . . I thought you were dead."

"But I'm very much better alive than dead, dear. A dead man cannot love, though he might have given his life for his love."

"Oh, I thought you were dead," she moaned. "How shall I tell you? How shall I tell you? You will hate me——"

"Never! You have told me, and I will love you every day of my life."

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" she groaned, bowing her head almost to the ground in her grief and misery. "How can I tell him and lose his love?"

Then suddenly she flung her hands from her eyes with a strange wild gesture.

"*Tenez!*" she said fiercely, with the spirit of one bent on probing utmost depths and having done with it. "Listen! I love you, Verney, with my whole heart and soul. I could not help it. I cannot help it. I love you. And—and"—her hands clasped up again in uttermost anguish—"I am married."

Verney gazed at her anxiously. He feared the strain



had been too much for her. "Don't look at me like that!" she cried. "I am not mad. It is true. It is true," and then her head sank down again and the slim bowed figure shook with sobs.

"Is it so, dearest?" he said gently, and if she could have seen how ghastly his face was, under its coating of blood and dirt, she would have shrieked aloud. "Then you will forgive me. I never dreamed of it."

"Forgive you? Forgive you?" she moaned. "Oh!" and all she would have said trailed off into a broken wail.

"Come inside," he said gently, "And when you will you shall tell me about it. You have suffered, I am sure. Come!"

He helped her through the window, and she sank in a forlorn and shivering little heap by the almost dead stove.

He went into the shed and came back with his arms full of pine chips, and crammed the stove as full as it would hold. Then to the window, noted her pine-pole anchor and lifted it outside, drew the shutters to, and made all snug, and when he turned he found the smoke welling in from the shed, and saw that in some way his original vent-hole had got stopped up.

So, weary as he was, and with raw and bleeding hands, he had to set to work re-opening his chimney, or the house would not be habitable. Fortunately, the last slide had only filled up the vent, not deepened their covering, and a quarter of an hour's thrusting set matters right again.

Then he went into the tunnel and got clean snow and set it to melt, got out the coffee-pot and some eatables, and then, with the wisdom of his great love, he said to her, "Sonia, dear, we are both starving. Will you help me? We want some cakes and potatoes."

And she got up slowly, her face all warped and swollen, and her eyes cast down and fearful of meeting his, and began with trembling hands to prepare their meal.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### TILL DEATH

**W**HILE Sonia was getting supper ready, Verney got a basin of snow-water, and, as well as he was able, got rid of some of the more visible signs of his encounter with the snow slope.

His head was badly gashed just above the forehead, and he bandaged it as well as he could. His torn fingers gave him excruciating pain each time he used them, for there was hardly any skin left on them, and the flesh itself was badly ragged.

He found, as he expected, that the wound in his arm had opened again, and over and above all these things and the disability of his sprained foot, he felt as though a steam-roller had gone over him and every inch of his body was sore.

Still, the marvel—the marvel of marvels—was that he was there at all, and not lying, a heap of broken bones and bruised flesh, at the bottom of the slope.

But, behind all the bodily aches and pains, was the still vaster dull aching at his heart, which beat with slow heavy thumps like the drum at a funeral march—beat as though determined to do its duty, since that was expected of it, but with nothing but sorrow in the doing. But, for the time being, heart and brain alike were somewhat numbed by the blow.

When he had stood below the cornice, outside there, he had said to himself that heaven was just up above, and the thought of Sonia had braced him to the final exertion and carried him up safely.

When he feared he had lost her he had found her again



—had doubly found her—as she was, and as he had dared to hope she some time might be—and then, in the very moment of finding her, he had lost her more hopelessly than ever.

And he loved her more than ever. And she loved him. But between them was a wall of partition, high as heaven, deep as death. And, she on her side, and he on his, they two must live their lives apart till Death. Ah!—his sick heart beat the words into the dull rhythm of its funeral march: “Till Death—till Death—till Death——”

Till Death should—what?

For Death sunders—and joins. Death might part them forever in this world. And Death might level the insuperable wall and join them still.

That some further sad story lay behind it all he felt sure, in a dull dazed way—as surely as he knew that Sonia’s heart was all pure gold, and that what she had done she had done perforce.

And as he pondered the matter heavily, while clumsily trying to bind up his wounds, he came to a dim perception of what the force that had driven her to such extremity might be.

His ragged fingers made so poor a job of the bandaging that at last he went back into the room to ask her help.

“Will you tie this up for me, Sonia?” he asked. “My fingers are good for nothing,” and he held out his left arm to her.

She took the bandage and pad and tied them on neatly and firmly, though her fingers shook so that they could hardly manage the knots, and her eyes never lifted from her work. Then she took off the clumsy bandage on his head, and shuddered pitifully at the long raw gash.

“It ought to be strapped or stitched,” she said anxiously. “But I have nothing——”

“By Jove!” he said, almost exuberantly. “There’s



the roll of plaster I got at Adelboden, in my *rucksac*. I'd forgotten all about it," and she had the roll out of the *rucksac* before he had finished speaking.

When she had strapped his wound she went quickly into the other room, and he heard the creak of a box lid. She came back in a moment, saying quietly, as she bent over her cooking again—

"You are soaked through. There are some things of Herr Unger's in there. You would do well to change," and he jumped at the chance, for the overheat of his climbing was running down into chill discomfort.

"That was good of you," he said, when he came in, dressed in the old man's gala costume, and carrying his own rags in a bundle. "I feel warm again and ever so much better. And I'm terribly hungry."

She turned to the frying-pan on the fire, and heaped his plate with frizzling brown slices of potato and tiny cakes fried with them, pushed a newly opened tin of sardines across to him, and poured out a cup of coffee.

"And you?" he asked.

But she shook her head. "I could not."

"Please try. I'm sure you are needing it as much as I am. And take some coffee. We'll have some Kirsch in it. It's been a wasteful time for both of us. It was hard on you to be deserted like that."

She choked over a scrap of cake she had made pretence of eating in order to satisfy him, and he saw that tears were running down her face.

Something odd and clumsy in the use of his hands drew her eyes to them, and she gave a gasping breath of pity and dismay.

"Oh—your hands!" and her own clasped sympathetically.

"They're pretty bad," he said, as cheerfully as he could manage it, as he slipped them under the table. "It was



scraping foot-holes in the slope out there that did it. Please don't look at them."

But she jumped up and went into her room again, and came back with strips of soft linen, with which she insisted on tying up each of his fingers separately, after anointing them with softened lard.

"That is very comforting and I am very grateful," he said. "I'm afraid my hands will have to be out of action for a day or two. It's a good thing there are no more tunnels to dig. Do try and eat something, please!"

What she ate would not have satisfied the kid, even as a sample of the good things up above. He reared himself up with his forefeet on the table, and watched them glassily, and gibbered whenever he was forgotten.

But even the little she forced herself to swallow, though it came near to choking her, was all to the good, and the coffee and Kirsch were warming and stimulating.

She would not let him move a finger when he had finished. She found him a cigar, cut it for him, and held a burning splinter while he lit it. Then she got her own snow-water and washed the dishes, and dreaded the moment when she could make no more work to do.

But that had to come, and so she braced herself to it, and came at last and sat down quietly on the floor by the open door of the stove.

"That good thought of yours about the rope saved my life, Sonia," he said, in a voice full of deepest feeling. "But for it I should be lying out there on the slope. I could never have got up without it, and the night would have finished me."

"I thought to go down after you, but . . . when it came to the point, my courage failed and I found myself a coward."

"You did well not to go. I doubt if you could have



got back, and you could not have helped me more than you did."

"You saved my life, too, when the ledge gave way. Oh, I shall never forget it," and she pressed her hands to her eyes again. "It was terrible to see you going down like that."

"I can't be thankful enough that I wasn't smashed to bits. And I can't understand how I'm alive and whole. I went bumping down like a football, and some of the leaps must have been fifty or sixty feet. Then I came against a snow-covered boulder and fell into a drift, and then I crawled back up the slope, wondering, as well as I could wonder, however I was to get back into the hole."

"I gave you up for dead. Oh," she sobbed, "I thought you were dead," and he knew that she was thinking again of the baring of her heart when she came upon him in the gap and believed him dead.

"I thank God with all my heart that He has spared me to be of use to you still," he said fervently.

"Try not to hate me—despise me—loathe me," she said, with a despairing little gesture.

"Sonia!"

"Ah—you might well," she sobbed, "and I could not bear it."

"Dear," he said gently. "You know all that is in my heart towards you, I think. That is beyond my power to alter now. Do you care to tell me the whole matter?—Not if it hurts you," he added quickly.

"Yes, I will tell you, and you will not judge me too harshly."

"I could not. I love you."

"I had no thought at all of this, when—when it began, when you offered me your help, that day at St. Peter's."

"I am sure you had not. How could you?"

"My only thought was for Darya. All my life I have



thought of Darya, and I would gladly have given my life for hers. When the trouble came, and Darya was taken from me, I was left absolutely alone. My father had died in Schlusberg, innocent of any wrong. My mother had died of grief at the loss of him. Louis was exiled by administrative order to Siberia. Aunt Olga, whom you know, was in Japan. Her husband, Prince Galtzine, was on a special mission there. I was desperate and ready to clutch at any straw that offered prospect of help. Do you know Paul Sordavala?"

"By name and repute only."

"Then you know nothing good of him. He is a renegade and betrayed his country. He had been at one time—or pretended to be—a great friend of my father's. He was in great favour at Petersburg because he had gone over to Russia. He came to me in my distress, with kind words and great promises. He had the ear of the Emperor. He would get everything straightened out. Louis should come home. Darya should be released. Everything!—and the price?—myself! He was three times my age. He was very wealthy. I cared nothing for him, but for Darya and Louis I cared everything. My life to redeem theirs was a small thing for me to give. I married him, and when, later on, I urged him to his promises, he laughed at my simplicity, said all was fair in love and war, and that he considered Darya and Louis were best where they were. Then I hated him, and I left him at the first opportunity. Aunt Olga had hurried home as soon as she heard the dreadful news, and she gave me asylum. And I set to work at once, with her help, to do what I could for Darya. Our poor Louis is beyond help, I fear. I do not even know if he is still alive," and she broke off with a deep sigh, and sat gazing into the fire.

"And Sordavala?" asked Verney, after a time.

"He thought to sway the new Emperor as he had done



the other, and went too far. He is in Siberia too—as Governor of the Eastern Province. It is equivalent to exile. I pray God he may never return.”

“Poor child! You have had more than your share of suffering. May the future make up to some extent for the past! . . . When you told me—out there in the cutting—I felt sure there was some such story behind it all.”

“And you do not detest me for this wrong I have done you?”

“You know I do not, and I acknowledge no wrong. My very highest hope in life, ever since I saw you, and got to know you a little bit, has been that I might some time win your heart, Sonia.”

She raised one hand an inch or two and let it fall—one of her expressive little gestures which spoke more than many words.

“For this little time, dearest,” he said gently, “we may be quite frank with one another. Whatever comes of it, I thank God that I woke up out there in time to learn that you cared for me like that. I shall treasure it all my life. After this, circumstanced as we are, we must speak of this no more—for the present. What the future may bring we cannot tell. It is all in God’s hands. All we can do is to wait patiently and see what comes. Speaking as a man, I should say the future owes you much. May it all come to you!”

“I ought to have told you—all this—out there on the lake that first day,” she said slowly. “But—you will understand—my whole thought then was for Darya. You were—then—only a means to an end. I never dreamed of this. You believe me?” and she glanced up quickly at him with her large sad eyes, like a child fearing reproof.

“Every word, dear, and I understand fully.”

“You are a good man and true, and you have been very good to me”—the shapely little head, with its rich braids



of hair somewhat ruffled by reason of all they had suffered since the morning, drooped confidently against his knee, and it was all he could do to keep his bandaged hand off it. "Never in all my life have I felt to any man as I do to you—not even to Louis. . . . Oh—why——" she broke out passionately, and shook with sobs which would not be restrained.

"Your confidence in me made me a very proud man," he said quietly. "That you should care for me like this makes me prouder still. God do so to me and more if ever I do any smallest thing to forfeit either the one or the other. I feel like a man who has discovered hid treasure."

They sat long before the fire, loth to lose one smallest fragment of this golden time which the gods had dropped into their laps. Giant Circumstance had flung them rudely in the face of Death, and, in the rough shock of that meeting in the Presence, their hearts had been momentarily bared to one another. Now, in the exaltation which comes of victorious encounter with the enemy, they claimed this tribute of precious moments as their own, before returning to the lower rounds of life.

"Aunt Olga and my dear Darya both urged me to tell you everything," said Sonia, one time. "I suppose they saw—or they feared——"

"And I was pluming myself all the time on letting no smallest sign of my feeling escape me."

"I knew," she said, with a shake of the head. "I suppose a woman always knows. But—I was a coward. I feared to lose you——"

"You need not. I would have helped you just the same, whatever you had told me. Though I don't say I would have had quite the same joy in helping you. But—I don't know that I can explain it—it was you, your own very self, the soul of you that looked out of your eyes, that first time we met by that blessed beech-tree at St. Peter's—that I



wanted to help. I never thought of you being married, of course. But I did think it likely—certain almost—that your heart was given to some one; but, all the same and not one whit the less, I wanted to help you with every ounce that was in me. Just as you wanted to help Darya. You asked nothing of her in return, but you would have given your life for her.”

“It is all very strange to think of,” she said, with deep feeling. “I wonder why . . . But it is very good to think you felt that way about me. My heart has been sick, but it warms it to think of that.”

“What day is it to-day?” she asked suddenly, one time.

“It’s rather hard to keep track of things, but I think it must be Thursday.”

And when she lapsed into silence again, and sat gazing into the fire, he presently said, “You are thinking that it is just fifteen days since we met one another—that only sixteen days ago we had not the remotest idea of one another’s existence. It is amazing to think of, isn’t it? And yet, truly, I know you better than people I have known all my life.”

“I wonder!” she said, with a brief smile at the fire. “You know all there is to know about me, for I have told you everything. But I doubt if a man ever knows a woman fully.”

“And you? Do you know me?”

“I think a man is more easily read than a woman,” she said musingly. “We are queer creatures. We don’t even know ourselves sometimes.”

But, precious as those short hours had been, the parting time had to come. They had gone through much since the morning, and the physical and mental strain had been great.

When he found her head drooping unconsciously against



his knee again, he moved slightly so as to wake her, and said cheerfully, as he lifted her up—

“You are tired out and I am tired out, and Billy has secured the best place in my bed. Good night, dear, and God keep you!” and he bent over her hand and kissed it gallantly, and she looked up at him with misty eyes and went away into her room.

He stuffed the stove with pine logs, for so much fresh air round the hut lowered the temperature very considerably, pushed Billy out of the middle of his bed, in spite of his soundless curses, rolled himself tightly in his blankets, and was asleep in a moment, regardless of aching bones and bruised flesh, for he had never been so utterly worn out in his life before.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### STORM-WASHED

**T**HEY both slept long and soundly. It was nearly mid-morning before Verney stretched and yawned, and promptly received a vigorous butt on the head from the disturbed Billy.

Sonia had been lying awake for an hour or more, but this morning was as no other morning ever had been. There was a well-spring of joy in her heart, such as had never been there before, and every thought of Verney set it bubbling afresh.

She would have risen the moment she woke, and set to work preparing food for him. There would be a new and vast enjoyment in serving him, in doing anything and everything for him. But until she heard some movement in the other room she would not stir, for sleep to an utterly wearied man is better than food.

But as soon as she heard his murmured remonstrance at his bedfellow's petulance, she sprang up and dressed quickly, and was out before he had time to anticipate her in the fetching of clean snow for the coffee.

"I'm sure you slept well," was her greeting, and he rejoiced in the happier look on her face.

"I don't think I ever turned round once till Billy went for me, a few minutes ago. And you?"

"I slept better than I have done for weeks past."

"I am glad. Now I will get you——"



"You will please to sit down there and not move a finger. You did your work yesterday. This is my day. How are all the cuts and bruises?"

"I've had no time to think of them, but, now you mention them, I perceive they are still there."

"You shall rest all day, and after breakfast I will dress them again, and the rest will do them good."

And truly it was pleasant to be thus ordered for his good, and to sit and watch her flitting about and busying herself with her little household duties, with the darkest of the shadow gone from her face and a new spring in her step. The perils yesterday, he said to himself, were a small price to have paid for this.

The piercing of the rubble heap, and the letting in through the gap of the fresh air and daylight, and at times even of gleams of sunshine, had their equivalents in the revelations of the night. The atmospheres—natural, mental, spiritual—were all braced and lightened. Life was on a wider and healthier base. The doubts and fears, and the disquieting veils that had hung between them, were all gone. They knew now where they stood.

Those impalpable dividing lines had, indeed, given place to a more solid wall of partition which neither could lift a finger to surmount; but, amazingly enough, their hearts were quite at rest.

Neither of them, even in their thoughts, formulated any specific hope for the future, and yet there was in them both a most decided, though unavowed, belief that, in some way or other, it would bring them relief and happiness, and they were content to wait.

The position in which they found themselves had come upon them unawares and without their seeking. It was quite beyond their own solving. They were even debarred from making any attempt thereat, or of giving a thought thereto. But there was in them a quiet confidence that it



was not beyond the Power that set the problem to work out the solution also. There they had perforce to leave it, and they were content to do so.

Verney's heart had gone out to Sonia in all sincerity and honour, without the faintest shadow of an idea of the anomalous position in which her unfortunate marriage placed them both.

He could no more withdraw his love, so wholly given, than he could extract his actual heart and hand it to another.

And he saw no reason to withdraw it, and had no slightest intention of doing so. He loved her for herself, and when he learned all she had suffered he loved her the more.

And she? Well, she had at one time dreamed girl-dreams of a love like this man's—steadfast, uplifting, all-absorbing; and—she had suffered much.

Can you wonder that she clung to it as the greatest good life had vouchsafed her?

That other repulsive yoke which bound her to a treacherous man might—must—hold them apart, so long as it existed. But a world full of Sordavalas could not keep her heart from Verney.

He watched her flitting about her work, with keen enjoyment, and knew by her face and her every action that this day was to her as no other had ever been.

But, delightful as it was to be ministered to in so wholehearted a fashion, he did not accept his shelving without remonstrance. He had hardly known a day's illness in his life, and to be suddenly labelled incapable and ordered to sit still and be waited on, was a novelty which needed some getting used to.

More than once he started up with intention of help, at sight of her coming in with an armful of wood or a pailful of snow, but each time he found himself peremptorily



ordered back again to his chair, with the smiling assurance that his assistance was not needed.

And indeed, time to think of his dilapidations being thus forced upon him, he found himself in none too good a bodily state. His head throbbed and ached dizzily at times under its stiffened bandages. Every bone and muscle, and every inch of flesh upon them, seemed but a part of one great bruise, and his twisted ankle had swelled painfully again as the result of his exertions on the snow slope.

But, the moment she had got her preparations for breakfast under way, Sonia turned her attention to him, replaced the hot dry bandages with cold damp ones, which made him feel fifty per cent. better in a moment, and bathed the swollen foot till it felt almost comfortable again.

"You are a most excellent doctor," he said appreciatively.

"I have a most excellent patient—if he will only obey orders and do nothing."

"It's hard work when you're not used to it. I've never been shelved since I was a kiddie. However, I'll do my best, unless I see you doing too much."

"It's a pleasure to be doing, especially when one is doing for those one cares for."

"I know it," he said, so heartily that she smiled.

"I can't help thinking of poor Aunt Olga," she said one time. "There she is at Unterhofen following us in her heart. She will be saying, 'Now they will be in Italy or Savoy. Soon they will be safely in England.' And here we are within a stone's throw of her, as it were, and our poor Darya is gone, and she will never see her again. It will be a terrible shock to her."

"You would like to get back to Unterhofen as soon as we get out of here, I suppose?"

"Yes. I must go to Auntie, and you will come too, and we will tell her the whole matter, and she will be very good



to us. She thought very highly of you, and somewhat hardly of me, I'm afraid. But she is very good and very clever, and she will understand. And we will nurse you till you are quite all right again."

"I won't need any nursing. I'm all right now, except that my fingers are in rags, and my foot——"

"And your head, and your arm, and all your bruises. Oh you can do with some nursing very well. I've done my utmost to spoil your holiday; you must let me do my best to make up for it."

"I never had such a holiday before."

"I'm quite sure of it."

Oh, yes, she was in very much better spirits, now that one of the loads that had been weighing on her was removed. Her other burdens had been thrust upon her, but that particular one, for which she felt personally responsible, had been hard to bear, and release from it was like a breath of new life to her.

The short day passed quietly and very happily with them, and all too quickly.

In the afternoon Verney proposed getting out his flags of distress, but Sonia would not hear of it.

"For to-day you will please me by doing nothing at all. I want you to rest absolutely," she said. "Wait till you get over yesterday."

And so, since that was her will, he simply sat and watched her, with an occasional pipe as a reward for obedience, and would have been well content to go on so for many more days than were likely to be possible.

No single word passed touching that great and wonderful matter that lay between them. Like a flash of lightning in a black night, the catastrophe of yesterday had revealed their mutual love. The storm had passed, the new day was calm and peaceful, but that which the storm



revealed was theirs forever, and words concerning it were neither necessary nor permissible.

But Verney's eyes followed her and dwelt on her with a benison in them, and now and again she would catch his glance and smile back at him, and he was content.

That new sweet light in her eyes, which told him frankly and without reserve all that was in her heart concerning him—the new spring in her step—the new joy in living, which showed in the valiant poise of the neatly-braided little head, in the high and purposeful look on the sweet piquant face, in the grace and charm of her every movement, and exhaled an incense of happiness which filled every corner of the little house; all these were to him richest treasure-trove. He would have given his life for her at any moment, and asked nothing in return. His highest and ultimate and only desire was for her happiness. And she knew it.

After supper that night they sat again in the firelight, as they had done the night before, talking at times, but more often in the closer companionship of that golden silence which only souls most perfectly attuned may hope to attain.

When he bade her good-night, at the door of her room, there was a blessing deeper than words in the reverence with which he pressed his lips to her hand, and the warm little pressure of her hand in reply sent a thrill to his heart. They had no need for clumsy words.

Sonia would have had him continue his rest cure next day also, and indeed the state of his hands precluded the idea of any very active use of them. But he was anxious to get his signals of distress hoisted, so that no chance of rescue might be missed.

“Not that I think there is much prospect of any one seeing them,” he said, “unless Herr Unger takes it into his head to stroll round this way, to see how his property is



getting on. But we must remember that our supplies are limited, and I would not like to see you starve."

"Oh, we shan't starve yet. We have plenty of potatoes, and there is still some flour and some meal."

"I do believe you are in no hurry to get back to civilisation," he laughed.

"Well! why should I be? It cannot make me any happier than I am here."

"That is very good to hear. All the same, I'm responsible for you, you see, and your aunt will require you at my hands. So if you will get out Herr Unger's old red shirt we will see what we can make of it. I'd like three flags, one fore, one aft, and one amidships."

So she got out the shirt, and cut it up under his direction into two small flags and one large one, and rooting about, they found a hammer and nails, and nailed them firmly to three slim pine-poles, and proceeded at once to display the large one through the great gap overlooking the valley.

To do this they had to splice pole to pole as well as they were able, and, from the state of his hands, he could do little more than show her how to proceed. It required three poles to get the flag out far enough, and to secure the inside end, and when it was done the flag sagged down away below the cornice.

But when at last it fluttered out in the breeze, they stood for a few minutes looking down over the great white sweep below, which had come so near parting them—a parting which would, without doubt, have led to a swift reunion beyond. For, if Verney had met quick death out there, Sonia would, as it turned out, inevitably have had to face the slower death of starvation up above.

And so, with the thought of it all in them, and the remembrance of the vital part that rough tunnel had played in their lives—his tragic disappearance, and wonderful



return, her agonies of loss and fear and despair, and the sudden baring of their hearts to one another—they stood side by side, their hearts swept with many emotions, but chiefly with an overpowering gratitude that they had been spared to one another.

With sudden stress of feeling Verney caught her hand and pressed it to his lips.

“But for you I should be lying dead and cold out there,” he said impulsively.

“Thank God for His great mercy to us,” she said, and her eyes were full of tears.

It took three more poles to hoist the flag through the vent-hole. “For,” said Verney, “it must stand well above the snow, or it will have no chance.” And space was so limited, and the conditions so awkward, that the splicing of these poles was much more difficult than in the other case.

However, they managed it roughly at last, and the butt of the lower pole was safely grounded, when, to their great astonishment, it began to shake violently, and they stood looking at it and at one another.

“Why, it must be blowing a gale up there,” said Verney. “It seemed quiet enough in the valley.”

And then a faint ghostly voice came down the vent-hole; “Hello! Below there!” and Verney gave a great shout.

“Hello! Hello! Hello!” he cried, funnelling his hands, till the wood-shed bellowed again, and the kid, who had been inspecting operations with his usual inquisitiveness, leaped twice his own height and then fled, and buried himself deep in Verney’s bed.

But shouting down a hole to which you can bend and get your mouth close, is one thing; and getting your voice to carry through a hole eight feet above your head, even when you are standing on a chair, is quite another thing.

However, there was no fear of the visitor up above going away till he had found out what that flag meant.



So Verney hastily sought a scrap of paper, and scrawled on it in German, in letters that a blind man could have read, almost: "THERE IS AN OPENING ON THE SLOPE BELOW, AND A ROPE."

Then he made a cleft in a pine-pole, secured his message in it, and pushed it up through the vent with the assistance of a stouter pole at its butt; and then they went round to the gap to await results, and lifted the pine-poles, to which the rope was attached, into position against the window-frame as they went. It was a good half-hour before the figure of a man crept slowly into the limited range of their outlook, gazing up at the gap with obvious wonder.

"Herr Unger himself!" said Verney joyfully. "Good old chap! I wonder if he can climb that rope?" The old man stood leaning on his ice-pick and staring up into the hole.

"Good-day, Herr Unger!" shouted Verney. "Can you mount the rope?" and he shook it to attract his attention.

Unger clambered along to it on the sides of his feet, which seemed to grip the snow like hooks, laid hold of it, and tested it knowingly with his weight, then slung his pick to his back, and came walking up the slope as though his life had been spent doing nothing else.

He hoisted himself in with a grip of Verney's hand, and stood gazing at them with wide eyes and open mouth, first and longest at Sonia in his daughter's dress, and then at Verney, his eyes blinking with surprise.

"*Herr gott!*" he jerked at last. "Is it you, Herr? Whatever are you doing here?"

"It's a long story. Come inside and have some coffee and some Kirsch. We are mighty glad to see you again. We felt sure you would come sooner or later."

He followed them wonderingly, and at sight and sound of him, as he got through the window, the kid came out of his hiding-place and frisked himself nearly out of his skin.



"There! There!" said the old man, rubbing him knowingly under the ears. "I never expected to see you again, little one. Is he the only one left, *mein Herr*?"

"The only one we have seen."

"There were six—the finest goats on the mountain-side. However—— And you, Herr? But—there were three of you, *nicht wahr*?"

"There were," said Verney quietly. "One has been taken."

And the old man uncovered solemnly and said: "God rest him! It is the toll of the snows. How was it?"

Sonia turned to see to the coffee while Verney rapidly outlined their story.

"It is the good mercy of God that enabled you to get here," said Herr Unger, when he had heard how they came to be in the hut.

"We have not forgotten to thank Him, you may be sure."

"I am sure. It is here in the mountains that one comes closest to Him—yes, indeed!—much closer than in the valleys and the villages. But you are hurt?" he asked, looking at Verney's bandages, his head, his hands, his foot.

And—"Herr gott! Herr gott!" kept breaking from the old man's lips as these were all explained to him. "But truly you have cause to be thankful, Herr. It is a wonder you are alive."

"I know it, and I am thankful indeed, and especially for the Fräulein's sake. If I had died out there on the slope it might have fared ill with her."

"Without a doubt. For let me tell you, Herr. I came up only to look this morning, and when I saw what had happened I turned and was going back, to wait down there till the spring, for it would have been useless digging this out now. It was just as I turned for a last look that your flag came up through the snow and gave me a start——"



"That was a close shave."

"Another minute and I would have been gone, and I might not have turned again. And no man would have passed by here for many months, since the path is gone."

"Thank God you saw us!" said Verney fervently.

"Yes, He is good to those who trust Him," said the old man, as simply as a child. "And the Fräulein—and I took her for a boy, that other morning," he said, with a smile.

"They adopted that dress for crossing the mountains, but the Fräulein found that beautiful costume and could not resist it. And I put on these things because my own were done to rags. You do not mind?"

"All I have is warmly at your service, Herr, and the Fräulein's. She is very beautiful. She reminds me of my little Frieda. She, too, was beautiful. She died two weeks before she was to have been married, and since then I have been alone."

"But never lonely," said Verney, recalling his happy temper the morning they first met him.

"Oh, never lonely, Herr. A man is lonely or not according to what he has in him, and, God be thanked, my life has always been a full one."

"If you will drink your coffee now I will have dinner ready very quickly," said Sonia, as she placed the coffee-pot and Kirsch before them. "I am sure Herr Unger is ready to eat after his long walk."

"Yes, I am hungry, but I brought something with me, as I expected to be out all day," and he produced a great chunk of bread and a section of sausage, which made Verney's mouth water.

"Ah—ha!" said he. "Sausage! We will swop delicacies with you, Herr Unger. We have lived on sardines and potatoes, and meal and flour cakes, for six whole days. Sausage is a luxury indeed."



"It is at your service, Herr and Fräulein. Many a time on the mountains brown bread and cheese have been my only faring, and good faring too!"

"If the Fräulein has been cooking for you all the time, Herr, you have not suffered, I am sure," he said presently, as the savours of Sonia's operations tickled his nostrils.

"She is the best cook in all the world," said Verney.

"So!" said the old man, and regarded her with new appreciation.

"But drink your coffee," said Verney, "and here is the Kirsch, and we will smoke to fill up the time. And now, how are we to get back to earth and the lower rounds of life?"

"Ah, yes!"—with a twinkle in the deep eyes. "To earth and the lower rounds of life! And which way—to the south still? That will not be too easy. You could never cross the Gemmi with that foot. It is painful? Can you use it at all?"

"Only with difficulty. I'm afraid it's rather a bad sprain. What's to be done? We would like to get back to Lake Thun."

"Ah—the Thuner See! Then I think you must wait here one more night, if you will, and to-morrow I will bring men from Artelen and a carrying chair. The path is still good up to a mile from here, and for that distance we must help you with our arms."

"How do we go?"

"Along the slope down there. That is the only way possible, but we will manage it all right. You see, our boots are made to grip the snow and bite the ice. We will manage it all right—unless another slide should come to-night, which God forbid! And there are no signs of it. The sky is clear."

"Then that is settled, and our indebtedness to you, Herr Unger, is more than money can pay."

"I thank God I was in time," was all Herr Unger said.



## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE LAST DAY

VERNEY had never been able to cultivate a proper taste for sausage even in its most aristocratic presentments, but he never forgot the piquancy with which Herr Unger's homely *wurst* appealed to him after six days of sardines. Sonia, too, acknowledged the charm of a change of diet, and Herr Unger's enjoyment in their enjoyment was visibly as great as their own.

He himself made most excellent play with Sonia's cakes and fried potatoes, and complimented her with the naïveté of an honest and truthful man given to direct expression.

He sat and smoked for a time after dinner, and drank more coffee, and then got up and said it was time for him to go.

"And you need have no further fears, Fräulein and Herr. Whatever happens we will come for you, now that we know you are here."

"We have had no fears all along, Herr Unger. We knew you would come sooner or later," said Verney.

"All the same, but for your flag I might have gone back none the wiser. What would you have done then?"

"In the last extremity, I suppose we should have had to make our way along the slope. But it would certainly have been difficult and dangerous."

"It would almost certainly have meant death. One false step down there and—the end, two thousand feet below."



He let himself cautiously down by the rope, waved his hand, and, treading slowly and carefully, passed out of their sight.

"He is a dear old man," said Sonia, with much feeling. "What can we do for him?"

"All he will let us, which will not be much. But we will at all events keep in touch with him and see that he never wants. He is a typical old Switzer of the breed of Tell and Winkelried. It may be difficult to repay him for all he has done for us without wounding his susceptibilities, but we'll manage it somehow."

During the rest of that day, Sonia showed no signs of joy at their approaching deliverance. She was indeed inclined to pensiveness, and Verney rallied her on it.

"I do believe you are almost sorry to be rescued," he said one time.

"Well!—and why not? I have been sadder here and happier than ever I was in my life before. We have been living in the depths and on the heights. The common round will seem very tame and anæmic, I fear. Here we have lived."

"And almost died. The common round is at all events safer."

"Safety is not everything. Perhaps it is not the best thing. Bitterness is at the bottom of the cup, and the flavour and sparkle at the top. What lies in between may be a trifle tasteless."

"Oh fair philosopher! If I don't argue the matter with you it is because I sympathise with your feelings. All the same, I prefer to think of you under the safe shelter of Aunt Olga's wing. Shall we advise her of our return?"

"I have been wondering. One can say so little in a telegram, and whatever one says may get known."

"Then I should say not. It will be a terrible shock to



her, I fear. But as you say, all one could say in a telegram would only prolong her anxiety."

"Yes, it will be a terrible shock to her, for she was very fond of Darya. But terrible shocks are best delivered quickly. The other is torture."

"Then we will just go quietly home and carry our news with us."

In spite of his arguments in favour of safety, Verney found himself regretting the near approach of the end of their stay in the rough little wooden hut, as heartily as Sonia herself. So vitally and indisputably true is it that life's highest and deepest joys depend not on one's outward circumstances, but upon one's internal possessions—not upon the body but upon the heart. Bruised and broken, weary and earth-stained, as he had never been in his life before, deprived of everything which in the ordinary course of things he had deemed necessary to his comfort, he had found there what the whole outside world could not give him.

There was a bar across his happiness, indeed, which he might not lift a finger to remove, and against which neither he nor Sonia would trespass by so much as a hair's-breadth, but no such shackle of treacherous man's imposing could fetter the freedom of their hearts. And for the rest—God was good, and they could wait. For Love, at its highest, seeks not its own, but only and wholly the good of the beloved.

They sat long before the fire again, that last night, with scarce a word between them, their hearts too full for speech.

Once, a little sob, which she could not quite choke down, shook Sonia as she leaned her shoulder against his knee, and it went straight to his heart.

He laid his bandaged hand gently on her shoulder, and



said quietly, "Dearest, we will not believe that God has nothing better for you than a broken life——"

"Yet—our poor Darya!" she whispered, with another catch in the throat.

"Yes—we cannot understand, but we may always hope, and that we will do as long as life lasts us."



## CHAPTER XXX

### DOWN-HILL

ON the following morning, when Sonia came out of her room she was dressed in her walking costume, and Verney was astonished to discover within himself a momentary shock of surprise. The picturesque charm of the Bernese dress had delighted him so hugely that he found it difficult to reconcile himself all at once to the change, and he stood regarding her in silence.

"I have wrapped the others up just as I found them and put them away into their box," she said, in reply to his look. "And these will be better for the slope down there."

"Quite right!" and he added with a smile, "There was a time, long ago, when I liked you best *en garçon*, because then I felt myself nearer to you. But now—yea, now I prefer you as yourself."

"When we get home I will get a costume just like that other one, and I will wear it now and then in memory of Herr Unger's hut."

"What about a hat?"

"I will make one after breakfast," and in half-an-hour she fashioned one out of a piece of Verney's ragged coat, something in the shape of a tam-o'-shanter, which covered her hair completely.

They tidied up the house as well as was possible, and left things all ship-shape, and about half-way through the morning a shout from below took them to the gap, and they found old Hans standing there with two others.



"Good morning, Herr——" and he stopped and stared at Sonia. "The others with the chairs are waiting on the path. I will come up. Is the rope secured?"

"All tight! And we are all ready," and the old man came up the snow-wall like a fly.

"*Ach*—so you are a boy again, *Fräulein*?" and he smiled quizzically at Sonia. "But, indeed, I like you best as a girl."

"You have most excellent taste, Herr Unger. So do I," said Verney, clapping him on the shoulder.

"I do myself," said Sonia. "But for crawling on snow slopes this is better."

"It is true. But I have brought a chair for you also."

"That is very good of you. I have put all the other things away in the chest, just as I found them."

"I thank you, *Fräulein*. There are just two, three others I will put away also, and then we will go," he said. "Meanwhile you and the Herr will please put on these rough stockings over your other things. They will keep you from slipping."

"I think we've left everything as we found it, except the cupboards, which are pretty well cleaned out," said Sonia.

"That is the difference between people," said the old man, with his quiet smile. "Some would have left everything topsy-turvy."

He carefully put his little store of books into the big wooden chest, closed the door leading to the wood-shed, locked the other door, and took down his zither, which he packed into a wooden case to take away with him saying—

"It gives much pleasure to the folks down there."

"Now," he said, making a stout loop in the end of the rope, "if the *Fräulein* will sit in that and let herself down over the ledge with the help of my hands—so!" and he lowered her gently to the waiting men below, who had flat-



tened a little platform where she could sit without fear of slipping.

"Now, Herr!" and Verney followed.

Then Herr Unger sent down a couple of stout pine poles, and they heard him closing the window and shutters, and saw him refixing the anchor of pine poles across the inside of the gap.

"I wondered how he would manage that," said Verney. "I hope the sides of that hole will hold," and presently the old man came sliding down the doubled rope, with the kid in his arms and his zither at his back. Then, loosing one end of the rope, he drew it down over the poles up above and coiled it on his arm ready for further use.

"Excellently well done, so far, Herr Unger. What's the next step?" said Verney cheerfully, though the exertion already undertaken filled him with aches and pains.

"I thought it all out last night," said the old man, as he cut two lengths off the rope, tied loops at their ends, dropped them over the other men's shoulders, and slipped the ends of the pine-poles into the loops. "Now, if you will take the poles under your arms, Herr, the men will go very slowly, and you can lean all your weight on them if you wish."

"You are a genius, Herr Unger. But what will happen if any of us slip?"

"We do not slip," said the old man quietly. "When it means death to slip one soon learns to walk surely; and then our boots are made to grip."

"And the Fräulein?"

"She is in my charge."

"Then I am sure she is quite safe."

"She is quite safe, Herr."

He took a couple of turns of the rope round Sonia's waist and handed her a long iron-pointed stick.



"We trod down as much of a path as we could in coming. You will find it quite easy," he said encouragingly. "Walk just in front of me, and I will put this long pole under your right arm—so!—now, you see! Quite easy and quite safe," and the procession started.

They went for a time in silence, and all Verney's attention had to be given to endeavoring to accommodate his ungainly hops to the short heavy tread of the mountain men.

Then those behind stopped, and his own two stopped, and he heard, "What then, Fräulein?"

"I'm sorry. I looked down and it made my head swim."

"It is better to look up, or straight ahead at the back of the man in front."

"I won't do it again. But it's horribly fascinating down there."

"Quite a little sermon, Herr Unger," said Verney, as they started again.

"It is a good rule, Herr, when your head is not used to the work. There is the path ahead of us, and the men with the chairs."

It took them close on an hour to cover the distance between the gap and the path, and when they had crawled slowly up the final ascent, and Sonia sank into her chair, she was faint and giddy with the unusual strain, and bathed in perspiration.

Verney was in much the like case, and both were soberly grateful under a very profound feeling of deliverance from mighty peril.

Sonia's head swam again each time she glanced down over the right-hand side of her chair, and the sight drew her eyes in spite of herself, till at last she closed them tightly, and did not open them again till they had rounded the shoulder towards Artelen, and those dreadful white slopes, sweeping sheerly down and down without a break,



and whispering incessantly, "Come! come! come!" were left behind.

Of all the party the kid showed most enjoyment in the journey. His master dropped him on to his feet as soon as they reached the path, and he danced and frisked jubilantly all the way along—now standing on the extreme edge with flicking tail and inquisitive eyes, gazing into the depths as though meditating a leap, and making unsophisticated heads spin just to look at him—then with frolicsome bounds away along the path in front—trotting back every minute or two with an anxious bleat, to make sure that it was all right with the rest of them.

And when Verney saw the old man's evident love for the little beast, his conscience pricked him that at one time he had pondered the idea of eating him. If Billy, or any portion of him, had been inside him he felt sure he could never have looked his master in the face.

At Artelen they stopped for rest and refreshments, and the women of the place gathered round them full of cheerful sympathy and encouragement, and were not a little surprised at the small need there was for any such sentiments.

"But we are all right," Verney laughingly assured them. "We've had a splendid time."

"The Herr has not starved, by the look of him," said one old dame.

"He has suffered all the same," said another.

"You should see Herr Unger's cupboards," laughed Verney. "It is they that have suffered most—nothing left but bare boards."

"Then it is a good thing old Hans took it into his head to go up there yesterday, or the Herr would have lived thin today."

"We will go right on to Adelboden, Herr, unless you



would prefer to break the journey here," said old Hans presently.

"We will do just what you think best, Herr Unger. But you have done much already this morning, and we would not overtax your kindness."

"Then we will go on and get the job ended. It is all downhill now, you see, and you will find greater comfort down there," and they jogged on again, and swung into Adelboden early in the afternoon, to the immense surprise of the inhabitants and the great gratification of the landlord of the *Post*, who welcomed them with effusion.

"You return then, Herren? But, truly, you have been longer of coming than I expected," he beamed, by way of greeting.

"And if it had not been for good Herr Unger here we might have been longer still, Herr Landlord. He will stop with us the night here. We cannot part with him yet. Now you will get ready for us the very best dinner the house can provide, and I and my young friend here want hot baths, and clean shirts and stockings, as quick as you can get them for us."

"At your service, *mein Herr*. Dinner in an hour. Baths, shirts, stockings, in ten, twenty minutes, as quickly as it is possible. But yes, I am truly glad the Herren decided to come back this way," and he showed them up to their rooms in a bustle of congratulation on their account and his own.

"But," he said, gazing inquiringly at Verney, as he opened the door of his room, after installing Sonia in hers, "surely—were there not two of the younger Herren?"

"Our companion was killed by the snow-slide which buried us in Herr Unger's hut," said Verney quietly.

"Ah—the misfortune!"

"And the one who returns with me is a lady. She dresses so for the climbing, as is customary with us."



"It is sensible," nodded the landlord, ready to accept anything as right and proper from such good customers.

"We shall stop here to-night, perhaps to-morrow also. Our experiences have been somewhat trying. Now!—the baths, the shirts, the stockings, and your best dinner in an hour, and meanwhile supply the friends who brought us here with anything they would wish to have."

The landlord rose to the occasion, and it was good to see the justice done to his ample providing by the burly mountain men. It would be hard to say who among them all enjoyed the impromptu banquet most.

The Artelen men were all middle-aged stalwarts, brown-face, clear-eyed, bushy-beard, slow and direct of speech, as became men who had ample time for thinking and not over many to speak to—thoughtful and sober-minded, as was natural to men whose lives were passed among God's masterpieces, with Death lurking closer than he did in the valleys.

They were genuinely loth to accept the gifts Verney pressed upon them. But then they were men of the mountains, and the spirit of the mountains was in them. They fell in with his ideas at last, but as men not accustomed to accept favors.

But the little speech of grateful acknowledgment for all they had done for himself and his friend, which he made to them as they sat sipping their coffee and Kirsch and smoking their big pipes, was much more to their taste, and every one of them begged him to come back and see them again next year.

Then they all wrung his and Sonia's hands very heartily, and tramped away up the road past Im Boden, and only Hans Unger remained, and to judge by his appearance he rather dreaded what Verney might be going to say to him.

It was when Sonia had bidden them good-night and gone



off to bed, and they two sat smoking together, that Verney told him what he wanted.

"You have done much for us, my friend——" he began.

"By the good God's mercy, Herr," said the old man hastily, as though to prevent more.

"Now I want you to do something more."

"Right willingly, Herr"—with visible relief—"I shall be glad——"

"In the spring-time, when the snows melt, you will be on the look-out, and when you think the time is near, you will come down here and send me a telegram, saying, 'Come,' and I will come at once, and together we will find her who lies buried under the snows up there, and we will lay her to rest."

"I will do it, Herr, just as you say. It will be April—May. The slope gets the sun, you see, but much snow and dirt came down that day, and it lies deep."

"And now—yourself, Herr Unger. No, it is no use your trying to escape the recompense of your good deeds——"

"But truly I did nothing, Herr, nothing at all. I was bound to go to my house, and I could not leave you there, so I brought you away. That was all."

"If I break into a man's house in his absence and make free with all he possesses, I am bound to make it good. That is simple, straightforward business. But for all your kindness and courtesies we feel under very deep obligation to you, and you must let us show it in the way that will give you most pleasure. Now, tell me. Will that path be opened again? It seems to me that will be a very big business. There must be hundreds of tons of stones and earth on it."

"I am not sure that they will open it again, Herr. For, you see, the new way by the Engstlingengrat is gaining



favour, and they may not consider it worth their while to spend money on the old path."

"And what will Herr Unger do then?"

"I cannot tell yet, Herr," with a weighty shake of the head. "Perhaps . . . but they may appoint a younger man to look after the path, though I doubt if any would do it better than I would, for it is the work I have done all my life, and I love it. To keep a safe path for men to tread—it is not a great business, but it is a good work."

"Yes, it is a good work, and they will not easily find one to do it as well as yourself, old friend. And I promise you I will do everything in my power to get it for you."

"Ah now—if you could do that, Herr!" and the deep eyes kindled hopefully, and the fine old face lighted up joyfully.

"I will tackle the authorities at once. And if it goes as we hope, you will let me see to your new house and new goats——"

"The poor beasts!—but doubtless one can get to love others as much."

"And new everything. That is the very least you can let me do, when I've robbed you even of your best suit, and have got it on at this very moment."

"You were very welcome to it all, Herr, as you very well know. And your goodness of heart makes too much of it all. But, truly, I would miss the mountains and my work, and if I can keep them I will ask no more."

So that was all satisfactorily settled, as far as it could be then, with no loss of dignity on the part of Herr Unger, and much to the content of his new friends, who had conceived a very great liking for the old fellow.

He spent the following day with them as an honored guest, and Verney, with the assistance of the landlord and the pastor of the church, laid his plans forthwith for getting him installed as guardian of the new way by the Engstilgengrat.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### TWO FROM THE DEAD

NEXT day, amid the hearty *auf wiedersehens* of the villagers and Herr Unger, and especially of the landlord of the *Post*—who would have asked nothing better than such free-handed guests, no matter how they chose to dress every day in the year—they set off down the Engstligenthal in the *Post's* very best carriage and pair, and covered the twenty and odd miles to Spiez in an easy-going three hours.

And as they were rolling along in the clear blue sunshine, with Bündi Horn gleaming white under new snow across the river, Sonia laid her hand suddenly on Verney's arm, and pointed to the other side of the valley.

"Do you remember?" she whispered.

And, just across there, he recognised the cattle-hut where they had fought the Black-faced Three just eleven days before.

"Yes," he nodded gravely. . . . "They little knew what they were doing. . . . They wanted a few pieces of silver, but they altered our lives. . . . It is strange to think of. Three rascals push themselves into our lives for a moment, and are kicked out, but the results of them are ineffaceable. If we had not met them, we would have got over the Tschingellochtighorn all safely——"

"And Darya would be alive and we would be on our way to England."

"Truly, cause and effect seem out of all proportion. But



life is full of anomalies like that. It was the oddness of the name "St. Peter's-insel," which casually caught my eye in Baedeker, that took me to that heavenly little place. Just suppose I hadn't gone that very day!—or suppose I had gone round by the path instead of going over the hill by that beech-tree! Why, our whole lives might have been altered!"

"It makes one quake inside to think on what very little things our happiness—and our lives too—depend. But I'm glad you came to St. Peter's, and that you came up the hill."

"I'm more than glad. I'm most profoundly grateful to the powers that ordered it so."

At Spiez, they lunched briefly at the *Spiezerhof*, and then hired a boat and a couple of men, and were pulled right across to the Château.

While yet a long way off they descried a white figure in the garden, and Sonia said, "That is M. Joannot. He always takes the air in the afternoon. He shall break the news to Auntie."

So they pulled in towards the water-steps at the far end of the garden, and M. Joannot, with a face as white as the cap in his hand, was awaiting them at the top of the flight when they landed.

Verney paid the boatmen, and they turned and started at once for home.

M. Joannot's white lips trembled with questions, but no sound came from them, and his eyes were full of the fears that were in him.

Verney took him gently by the arm.

"We bring very sad news, M. Joannot, and we want you to break it to Madame, lest the shock be too great for her. You will just go to her and say, 'Miss Sonia and Mr. Verney have returned. There has been an accident.' Nothing more. Then call to us. We will be just outside."



"And Mlle. Darya?" gasped the old man shakenly.

"We were all caught by an avalanche, and she was swept away. Mlle. Sonia and I have been under the snow for six days."

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* The poor child! Our poor little Darya! But what an ending to her sad little life! *Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" and his long white hands twisted till they cracked."

"Now go, dear M. Joannot. The sooner we get it over the better for all of us," and the old man went off along the path under the trees, still murmuring, "*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*"

He met his mistress just coming downstairs after her afternoon nap, and she stopped at sight of him and said—

"Why, my good Joannot, what has taken you? One might think you had seen a ghost."

"I have, Madame, I have. Two, returned from the dead. Mlle. Sonia and Mr. Verney have come back——"

"Sonia and M. Verney?—Returned from the dead? And Darya?"

"There has been an accident. They will tell you——" and he stumbled out through the window and mutely waved the others in.

Sonia flung herself on the motherly breast which had been her one sure refuge since her own mother died, and hung there sobbing, while Madame's anguished eyes prayed Verney to explain.

"Our poor Darya's troubles are over," he said simply. "We were on the path round the Tschingellochtighorn when an avalanche caught us. We two escaped by a hair's-breadth, by the mercy of God. Darya was taken. We have been buried under the snow for six days, and were only got out the day before yesterday."

"*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*" gasped Madame, and M. Joannot twisted his hands again to keep his feelings under



restraint. "That is a terrible ending to it all," and Sonia gave a convulsive sob, as though the words suggested some reproach for this unforeseen result of her valiant attempt at rescue.

"Nay, I did not mean that, dear child," said Madame, quick to interpret, through the tension of her own feelings. "You did everything you could, I am quite sure. And M. Verney has suffered, I can see."

"Oh, Auntie, I would have died with her if M. Verney had not held me back. He has put his life between me and death all through. But for him I would not be here."

"I thank you, Monsieur," said the old lady brokenly. "Thank God, one of them is spared to my old age! . . . I am sure you did all you could."

"For Darya I could do nothing. She was in front, and the snow swept her into the depths before our eyes. Before we realized it Sonia and I were buried ten feet deep. We escaped by a miracle."

"God be thanked for the miracle!" said Madame fervently. "If this dear child had been taken too, I should have been left desolate indeed. We have cost you more than we dreamed of, M. Verney."

"The cost is nothing, Madame, I assure you. I too thank God most gratefully for the life that is spared to us," and Madame's womanly wit fathomed the fact that these two understood one another.

She smoothed Sonia's hair softly, and drew her to a seat.

"You will tell me all about it presently," she said gently, but the kind old face was full of perplexity and trouble. "And your injuries, M. Verney? Are they serious? Shall we send for a doctor?"

"They are really not very much—a sprain, and a knife-wound, and a thousand bruises, more or less," said Verney cheerfully. "But if a medico can hasten the cure I will thank him."



"A knife-wound! My good Joannot, run yourself at once for Dr. Stauffer, and tell him to bring everything that may be necessary. Tell him nothing, you understand, except that a friend who is stopping with us has had an accident. And—Joannot—tell them to send us in some tea at once. I will see to the rooms myself," and M. Joannot sped away, peeling off his white jacket before he was well out of the room.

"Just a cup of tea," as old Barbara brought it in, with a face like a mass of interrogation marks, "and then I will take you to your rooms. Barbara, take up hot water and cold at once to the room M. Verney had before, and also to Mademoiselle's. The beds will do later."

"How came the knife-wound, M. Verney?" she asked, as she handed him his tea. "Is it your hand?" and she eyed his bandages.

"No, it's in my arm here. We were waylaid by three rascally Italians in the Engstligen Thal as we were making for Adelboden. We had to beat them off, and one threw his knife and it just sliced my arm."

"But that is dreadful—here in Switzerland!"

"We paid them for it, but it was really the delay they caused us that brought about our catastrophe. But for them we would have been across the Gemmi when the snow-slide occurred."

Then a tap on the door, and M. Joannot's troubled face appeared.

"Dr. Stauffer is here, madame"—and Sonia started up to make her escape by the other door. "He is in the library"—and Sonia breathed freely again.

"You will take the doctor up to M. Verney's room, my good Joannot, and offer him any assistance in your power," and Verney followed him out of the room.



## CHAPTER XXXII

### HOPING EVER

VERNEY, with his arm in a sling, his foot tightly bandaged, his head neatly strapped, and his ragged hands—covered with healing ointment—in white kid gloves, lay on a sofa, smoking by permission, and talking with Madame Galtzine, long after Sonia had retired to her room that night.

Between them they had told Madame pretty nearly everything that was to be told, but both Madame and himself had desired, and seen the necessity for, this quiet private sitting.

"The doctor says you must have suffered agonies, my dear boy," said Madame pitifully. "And I suffer for you in my heart, for we had no right to ask so much from you."

"But you did not, dear Madame. These little matters are quite incidental. We could neither foresee them nor avoid them. I cannot think of a single thing we ought to have done differently. Unless, indeed, we had paid those rascally Italians to leave us in peace, and that commended itself to none of us."

"*Canaille!*" murmured Madame.

"I hope you won't let my little accidents worry you. A quiet day or two and the doctor says they will do all right. Only I'm afraid I must beg M. Joannot to valet me, for the arbitrary Stauffer forbids me to take these gloves off till I've got some skin on my hands."

"You shall have everything done for you. Every minute I am saying to myself, 'Thank God he brought Sonia



back to me!" You do not know how very dear that dear child is to me."

"I can imagine. I would give my life to make her happy."

"You know the whole matter. She has told me."

"Yes, I know the whole matter. But—the whole of my heart was hers already, and, once given, it is given for good and all, with us Verneys."

"I blame her somewhat still for not having made things plain to you before."

"I would have helped her just the same."

"No doubt. Still . . . but who shall judge another? The greatest thing in her life has always been her devotion to her own people. She sacrificed herself for Darya without a moment's hesitation. She has been very sorely treated, and has suffered much. And it is very bitter to think of, for she has a heart of gold, and her life so far has been sorely shadowed."

"Please God there may be happier times in store for her! For myself I regret nothing—except that I cannot give her all the happiness that is in my heart for her."

"I feared how it would be with you whenever I saw you at St. Peter's——"

"And I was pluming myself on my self-suppression," he said, with a smile. "For it seemed incredible to me that her heart should be free, and I said to myself, 'I must wait and see.'"

"She was thinking only of Darya, and she told me she had told you all that was necessary."

"So she had. She told me absolutely all I had a right to expect. I was just her very willing assistant, nothing more. The rest came after, and she was not to blame in any slightest way."

"You see," said Madame, following her own train of thought, "to all my old people here she has always been



Mademoiselle, and Mademoiselle she will remain to the end of the chapter. To our good Joannot and myself, who ought to have known better, it has felt like an ignoring of her unfortunate marriage, and we have kept it up. But it is undoubtedly misleading to outsiders."

"It is difficult to think of her as married. Is he still out in Kara?"

"He is a monster," said Madame, more bitterly than he could have imagined possible in her. "His cruelties at Kara were so great that even his subordinates revolted at them, and that says much, for the men they send out there are the hardest of the hard. They have moved him on to Yakutsk. It is banishment. The Tsar is very bitter against him. He will certainly never be allowed home again."

"That is so far good for Sonia. He cannot trouble her. But still, it is very hard on her."

"It is a broken life for her, poor girl," sighed Madame.

"I would not pass proper bounds, even in my thoughts, if I could help it. But it would be a dull heart that would not wish better things for her."

"Yes, indeed! She deserves the very best life can give her, to make up for all she has gone through—and always for others. She has always thought of everybody before herself."

"Rightly or wrongly, we will hope," said Verney. "You will not object to my writing to her when I have to go back to Paris?"

"Friends may surely write to one another. I have fullest faith in you, my boy. I am sure you will do what is right."

"Thank you! I will do no more than is right. It would be very hard to drop out of your lives and hear nothing of you."

"That would not be possible now," said Madame quietly.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THEY WERE CONTENT

WITH perfect rest, and attentions such as he had never been under the necessity of receiving before, Verney's numerous—almost innumerable—wounds and bruises behaved exceedingly well.

Even Dr. Stauffer's professional imperturbability had received a shock at sight of them.

"My dear sir!" he gasped. "What on earth—Have you by any chance been under a steam-roller?"

"Not quite so bad as that, doctor. Only under a snow-slide, but it was mostly rocks—the bits that hit me, anyway."

"A snow-slide! And what part of the snow-slide did that?" pointing to the knife-cut.

"Ah, that was before. A dirty little beggar of an Italian threw his knife at me. Fortunately, it took me in the arm——"

"*Herr gott*, yes! An inch or two to one side and you would not be here. And it has been neglected, too. You ought to have——"

"I know, but when one is buried for six days under ten or twenty feet of snow and dirt, one does what one can, you see, and that is not always just what one would."

"And your hands! Why, there is hardly a scrap of skin left on them. Painful?"

"Abominably, now you mention it. But it was no good saying so before. That was through falling five hundred



feet down a frozen snow slope, and being under the very painful necessity of climbing up it again."

"You seem to have had pretty lively times."

"Oh, I had. How soon can you patch me up?"

"I'll patch you up at once, but if you want to be on your feet again in a fortnight you will have to do exactly as I tell you.

"Let me smoke, and I'll be as good as gold," and that had entailed his most complete surrender to the loving and arbitrary ministrations of two of the most gracious and tender-hearted women he had ever met, and they rejoiced greatly in their patient.

On the grounds of a climbing accident and physical incapacity for travel, he had no difficulty in obtaining an extension of his leave; and that fortnight he spent at Unterhofen, recovering from his wounds, was the happiest he had ever enjoyed.

There were still bright sunny days when, with the assistance of M. Joannot's ever-ready arm, he could limp out on to the terrace, and be tucked up in a chair where he could lie and muse on the ever-changing, unchanging wonders of the Jungfrau, and the Blümlisalp, and the Niesen.

And many an interesting talk he had with M. Joannot, when he came out to take the air and rise above his professional duties for a brief space.

M. Joannot told him with gusto of the discomfiture of the pushful Sergeant Peter Wyss from Noirburg, when he caught up with old Barbara and himself off Scherzligen, and of the civilities, and otherwise, that ensued. And Verney detailed their adventures on the road and in the hut; and though he never broached the more intimate matters, M. Joannot was no fool, and had not spent sixty-odd years in the study of his fellows in vain, and one time his quiet, "*Eh bien*, Monsieur, with all my heart I wish you joy!"



made Verney smile, and showed that M. Joannot had a shrewd suspicion as to how the land lay.

And now and again, as a special treat, the good Joannot would assist him into one of the boats, and he would loll comfortably on the piled-up cushions in the stern, while Sonia pulled slowly along the shore to Gunten or Merlgen, and they recalled the more strenuous former times when he did the pulling, and there were lively doings on the lake.

Then there were long delightful evenings under the shaded lamps in the small *salon*, when the pine-logs hissed and spurtled on the wide open hearth, and Sonia and Aunt Olga sat and worked, and Verney read to them, or dropped the book and they chatted together while he smoked.

They spoke often of Darya. The thought of her could never be far from them as yet. The remembrance of her broken life tempered the gladness of the new hope that was in them, but the past buries its dead, and here were not wanting palliatives for the mitigation of their grief.

"Sonia was telling me," said Madame, one night when she and Verney were alone, "that you had doubts whether our poor Darya could have found safe asylum even in England."

"Yes, I had grave doubts—that is, if they had learned where she was, and had cared to require her of the authorities. England is sanctuary for political offenders only."

"Then, truly, I am not sure but that sad end was after all the best. It seems dreadful to say so, but it would have killed her to be taken back to prison, and if she had come to learn the possibility of it her days would have been full of fear."

"Of course they might never have moved in the matter, even if they had learned. I don't really see why they should."

"You don't know Russia as well as I do, my boy. If



Russia had heard, she would have forced them to it. She is implacable."

"There were no politics in it, though. It was purely a private matter."

"Pesthel was one of themselves. They would not forget," she said bitterly; and was gravely thoughtful for a time, and then said soberly: "Yes, what is best. God's ways are past our understanding. She is at rest and she died free, and she and Sonia were together to the end. Worse might have befallen her . . . and as for our Sonia, she would have known no peace while Darya was in danger. What a strange coil life is!"

"Sonia will at all events always have the satisfaction of feeling that we did all that could be done. The outcome was beyond us."

"As it always is, my boy. We hope, and we plan, and we strain ourselves to breaking-point, but God always has the last word. . . . And His word is the best word, though we do not always see it so."

And in all those days, though amplest opportunity was not lacking, neither Sonia nor he ever ventured one word beyond the honourable bounds they had set themselves, regarding that of which their hearts were full.

In that revealing moment under the snow their hearts had spoken once for all. There was no more to be said—until it could all be said without reserve or trespass.

And they were content.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### LIKE A STAR IN THE NIGHT

AND so, in due course, came the inevitable last day. Verney's head was whole again, his arm almost well, his innumerable bruises no longer troubled him unduly, his foot alone still showed signs of conflict, and he had to ease his use of it with a stick.

He had strolled out with Sonia for a last turn round the garden, and as they stood, side by side, at the end of the terrace, gazing at the lofty serenity of the Jungfrau, she said to him quietly—

“You will come in the spring?”

“I will come the moment I hear from old Hans.”

“I would like to be there too.”

“It will be very trying for you, Sonia,” he said doubtfully.

“Nevertheless I would like to be there. She was so very dear to me. She would like me to be there, I am sure.”

“It shall be as you will, dear, I will come straight through to Thun and call for you here. What about Aunt Olga? Will she——”

“I think not. We shall have to cross the mountains, you see. But, you and I, we were with her at the last, and it is meet that we should be with her again.”

“I will send you a telegram, then, as soon as I hear from Herr Unger, and I ought to be with you about twelve hours later. Perhaps I could get the old fellow to organise a search before he wires me. It may be some days, you know, before we find what we seek.”

“Oh, no, no! We must be there beforehand. I cannot



bear the thought of strangers finding her and looking at her. Herr Unger is different, but any one else——”

“I know just how you feel, and I will settle it all. And now—there is the steamer loosing from Gunten and I must go. Dearest, I pray God to have you in His keeping!”

He bent and kissed her hand warmly, looked deep into her shining eyes, and went.

She waved to him from the upper terrace, as the steamer loosed from the pier, and then he was left with only his happy memories of her.

And all through his journey he was solitary and silent, for no stranger must meddle with this new and exceeding great joy of his.

He lived again through every one of those thirty odd wonderful days, as his train rumbled along to Berne, to Neuchâtel, through the Jura, across the long plains of France; and every vision of her which his memory conjured up seemed to him brighter than the last.

He saw her again like a summer storm, thunder and lightning and heavy rain, as she flashed out on him from behind the big beech on St. Peter's-insel.

He saw her again like a radiant star, in the glamour of the roses and the shaded lights at supper that same night; and then like a modest clouded moon in the boat on the lake.

Then she was the slim spirited boy, yodelling exultantly along the hillsides because her purpose was accomplished, and Darya was free—but, withal—and he smiled at the remembrance—much concerned for the friendly shelter of her cloak and the proper donning of her unaccustomed garments.

Her brief eclipse, while Darya lay recruiting at Unterhofen, served only to heighten the rare delights of their later days together there.

But chiefly he enjoyed the thought of her in old Hans Unger's hut on the side of Tschingellochtighorn, and—



greatest joy of all—the deep-cut recollection of that supreme moment when, in the shadow of death, the veils fell from them, and their hearts were bared to one another as hearts will be at the Judgment Day.

Truly his had been a strange wooing, and the end of it was still hid from them. But not to many, he thought, did it fall to know and be known to one another as they two had been made known, by circumstances so trying and overpowering.

And his fellow-travellers, wondered at the taciturnity of this tall young man in the big fur coat—which, in spite of the fact that his head was higher in the clouds than ever the Jungfrau's was, he had had the common sense to buy at Berne—who politely declined all attempts to draw him into conversation, though he obviously spoke both French and German like a native; who smoked cigars of price all night long and did not care to sleep; and who seemed to have ample food for thought, and of the highest quality. For his eyes shone out on the night like lamps, as though he saw things outside there in the darkness which none had ever seen before; and now and again, without any visible reason, little smiles lurked in the corners of his mouth, as though the wild gorges of the Jura held for him sweet humours which the rest of the world had never yet discovered.

And their sleepy surmises hit the mark, for the train as it clanked through the heights and depths sang, "Sonia! Sonia! Sonia!" and out there on the darkness the sweetest face in the world looked in on him with love and faith and hope shining tenderly in its eyes.



## CHAPTER XXXV

“KOMME!”

..

ON the eighteenth of April—six months to a day almost after he parted from Sonia—Verney received Herr Unger’s brief telegram “*Komme*,” and seven hours later he was stamping impatiently about the platform of Pontarlier station, watching the sun rise over the frowning portals of Switzerland, and munching a stout sandwich-roll, which he had washed down in advance with a cup of hot coffee in the buffet, and doing his best to quicken his own vitality and that of the deliberate officials, who had evidently no idea that Sonia was waiting expectantly for him over the hills there on the shore of the Thuner See.

It was after mid-day before the slowest trains and steamer it had ever been his fate to travel on landed him on the well-known pier, where M. Joannot, in all the dignity of his best clothes, was awaiting him.

“All well, M. Joannot?”

“All very well, Monsieur—anxious only to set eyes on you again. I will see to everything if Monsieur will go on.”

And two minutes later he had bent over Sonia’s hand once more, and his heart was beating high at the sight of her flushed face and shining eyes.

Madame’s welcome was motherly in its warmth, but the business he had come upon was such as tuned them all to soberness.

“Will you not rest the night, after your long journey?” she asked.

“Herr Unger will be waiting for us at Artelen, at ten o’clock to-morrow morning, and we must not disappoint him, dear Madame. I thought we might pull across to



Spiez, and if M. Joannot could come with us he could bring back the boat. We can be at Adelboden this evening, and at Artelen early to-morrow."

And Sonia's face showed him that he had done well.

In spite of the sadness of the errand on which they were bound, it was a mighty joy to him to be rowing Sonia across Thuner See once more, with the Jungfrau and the Niesen smiling down upon them, and Stockhorn sprawling his lazy bulk along the western shore, and the wooded heights behind the Château all waving hearty welcomes.

And Sonia, in spite of her gravity and her sombre dress, was visibly happy and content at heart, and her eyes told him more than her letters had ever dared to do. If the good Joannot had not been there he would have shouted aloud for very joy at sight of her.

M. Joannot bade them a quiet, "Adieu and *au revoir*, Mademoiselle and Monsieur!" at the boat-landing at Spiez, and pulled away, murmuring to himself, "Though what to wish you in your search, *mon Dieu*, I know not."

So once more they were rolling along the Engstligen Thal, and the sight of the cattle-shed brought the former days vividly back to them again. But if the Black-faced Three had met them on the road, it would have taken more than all their southern acumen now to recognise one of their vanquishers in the sweet-faced girl who, nestling in her furs against the bite of the April wind, lived those past days over again, and watched the remembered scenes flit by with sorrowful pensive eyes.

At sight of her companion, however, their heads would assuredly have tingled, for he looked just as fit and strong as he did the day he broke them, and readier than ever to do it again if necessity should arise.

They did not talk much on that journey. Their hearts were in tune, and a touch on the arm, and a glance this



way or that, told all that was in them more eloquently than words.

The landlord of the *Post* rejoiced at sight of them, but subdued himself and behaved with most exemplary decorum after a word or two of explanation from Verney.

To Verney it was akin to translation to a higher sphere to find himself sitting opposite Sonia again at supper, and he would have sat long afterwards, but she was thoughtful of his night journey, and decreed an early retirement, in view of their early start next day.

Eight o'clock found them climbing past Im Boden, in all the vivifying glory of a fresh April morning, and never had young sun shone so brightly, nor meadows gleamed so freshly green, nor snow-capped mountains glistened so like frosted silver. All the world was young, and all abrim with life, and their hearts were young, and the joy of life was strong in them, and they were going in sorrowful love in search of their dead.

They stopped for a short rest at Wildeschwand, to the vast delight of the landlord of the inn and his wife, and before the time appointed they were at Artelen, and found old Hans Unger awaiting them there.

He welcomed them soberly, but could not conceal his satisfaction at seeing them again. He had spared no trouble in his arrangements for their comfort.

“My new house is building on the new road to the Engstligenalp, Herr,” he said to Verney, as they two sat on the bench outside smoking, “but till it is ready, I am living in the old one which you know so well. The old path is still blocked, but I have cut a safe enough way to it, and I have had it all cleaned up for you, in case you find it necessary to stay a day or two. And this time you will not need to live on potatoes and sardines, I assure you.”

“That is very good of you, Herr Unger, and truly meet-



ing you again is like meeting a dear old friend," said Verney heartily.

"I could wish no better than that, Herr. Sad am I that you come upon so sorrowful a business. But the Fräulein does my old eyes good to look upon. She is wonderful! And to think that she lived in my old hut!"

"You have discovered nothing yet?" asked Verney quietly.

"Nothing, Herr, though I have never failed to keep a look-out. It may be that with all our searching we shall find nothing, you know. The snow brings down much earth and stones at times, and in places they pile very deep."

"Better if it were so, perhaps. But Mademoiselle would know no peace unless she knew. And from that point of view it is better that we should find what we seek, and lay it reverently to rest."

So, presently, they were pacing the side of Tschingellochthorn once more, and their hearts went back to that former time when, so full of confidence and hope, they were convoying Darya to—freedom.

The first sight of the vast sweep of the slope set Sonia's heart throbbing painfully. Through the ragged remnants of its royal white robes the cruel might of the mountain thrust itself harshly into view. The huge scarred limbs of it, black and seared and pitted, sprawled down into the valley as though reaching out hungrily after prey. The long swathes of fading snow, which still lay here and there, bristled with venomous black rocks, the rough warted hide of the sleeping giant. To Sonia, Tschingellochthorn looked like a treacherous crouching monster, instinct with murder and sudden death, sullenly endeavouring to hide its deformities under a tattered garment of innocence.

It made her shiver in spite of the white young sun, and



when she glanced askance into the depths, her eyes were full of fearful expectancy.

Somewhere down there Darya was lying, wan and broken.

But only the poor outer husk, her heart protested.

Darya herself—all that they had loved, except that mere circumstance of bodily form—was emancipated and free, and safe for ever from earth’s sorrows and the cruelties of man.

Ah yes! But, after all, it was the gracious and beautiful young bodily form that had been known to them best and loved by them, and it was terrible to think of it lying there, bruised and broken, among those terrible rocks.

Herr Unger led them by a new path, worn by his feet on top of the débris under which lay the old one, till they came to a hole and a flight of roughly-fashioned steps, which led down to the door of the hut.

And, at sound of them outside, there came a hopeful bleat within, and as soon as the door opened, their old friend Billy rushed at them, feinting furiously with his growing horns and testifying his delight in every kiddish way he could think of.

“Dear little Billy!” said Sonia, and endeavoured in vain to caress him.

“I knew you would like to see him again, since he was of your party,” said old Hans hospitably.

“Yes, indeed. Billy stood it better than any of us. . . .

“How strange it is to find oneself here again!” said Sonia.

“I have been here many times since then,” said Verney with a smile.

“So have I.”

“I know,” he nodded, “I have met you here.”

And Herr Unger looked from one to the other in much wonder, and his lips were parted to speak; and then under-



standing was vouchsafed him, and he nodded sagely and said "*Ach, so!*"

Everything looked very much as it had done, except that he had enlarged the gap outside the window so that one could sit there and look down into the valley. And everything was very spick and span, and the old man opened one of the cupboard doors and showed them, with innocent pride in his own forethought, the store of good things he had laid in for them.

"You will not starve this time," he said confidently.

"Starve?" said Verney. "I never lived so well in all my life," and again the old man looked at him with the glimmer of doubtful wonder in his eyes, and then said—

"You had the best of all sauces, Herr," and laughed quietly at his own wit.

Sonia went over to the window and glanced somewhat shrinkingly down into the sunlit valley. Herr Unger applied a match to the stove, and Verney, prowling about and renewing his acquaintance with things, wandered into the woodshed.

He found the stove-pipe properly reinstated, otherwise everything much as before, but in one corner was something new, and he was standing looking at it when Herr Unger came in for more wood.

"I thought it well to have it ready, in case—you understand," said the old man, in a whisper, and he opened it slightly and displayed a roughly-made stretcher, in which was rolled a clean white sheet. "But we will cover it up lest the Fräulein should come upon it." He buried it under the hay, and Verney went soberly back into the front room.

"Do you mind resting here for a little while, Sonia, while Herr Unger and I go up and decide some points connected with our search?" he asked gently.

She nodded, without looking up, and he thought she was



weeping. He beckoned to Herr Unger, and they went quietly away up the steps.

They went back some thirty yards or so, and then Verney stopped and said—

“As far as I can judge, we must have been about here when the snow came down on us. Now what is that?” and he pointed to a slight depression which seemed to run down the mountain-side to where they stood—a mere sinking-in of the rough stony surface of the slope.

“There was a gully there, and a stream.”

“And a cleft in the wall of the path on this side?” asked Verney quickly.

“Yes, Herr, a cleft, and if you will look over the other side you will see that it runs right down to the valley,” and following the old man’s pointing finger he could make out the wrinkle in the mountain’s skin, by the strip of fading snow which lay all the way along the unsunned side of it.

“That, I think, is where we shall find her,” said Verney quietly. “For the snow and rubble shot out upon her through just such a cleft, and it must have been about here.”

“Then, Herr, it is doubtful, I fear, if we shall ever find her, for down below there, that gully was ten, fifteen, in places twenty feet deep, and now, you see, it is only just to be seen.”

“It is there we must search, however.”

“We will search carefully, Herr, but——” and he shook his head unhopelessly.

“How do we get down to the lower slope?”

“This way, Herr,” and he led him a short way back along the path. “I have cut a sloping way down here, and, once below, it is no longer difficult.”

It was rough walking, and needed caution to avoid rolling stones and broken ankles, but the snow lay only here



and there in the hollows, and it was withered and harmless.

They made their way along the slope to the long white streak, and as Verney stood there, looking up towards the path, and endeavouring to judge how far a body launched from it would fall, his eye was drawn along to the hut by the sight of Sonia leaning out of the window and watching him intently.

He waved his hand to her, but she only nodded, and watched him, her face and eyes eloquent with anxious inquiry.

"Where do you think, Herr Unger?" he asked quietly. "The snow caught her full, with tremendous force, and swept her right down here. Now where would she be likely to fall?"

"*Herr gott*, it is hard to say, Herr. It might be right under the path. It might be well out here. And, wherever it was, all that followed might carry her further down, or it might only bury her the deeper."

"Then all we can do is to follow this depression from right below the path, and examine it carefully until we have got quite beyond the range of possibilities. And that, I can see, will take time, so the sooner we start the better."

"A couple of poles will help us. I will get them. *Ach*—Herr!—the *Fräulein*!" and here was Sonia picking her way to them along the rough slope, with Billy skipping nimbly at her heels. And Verney wished she had not come down, for if they found what they sought it might be too pitiful for the eyes of love to look upon.

"I could not sit there doing nothing," she said, anticipating his feeling in the matter.

"For your own sake, dear, I would sooner you were up there. You understand?"

"I understand, and I will go when you tell me to. But let me help as far as I can."

"Very well. But I'm afraid it is going to take longer



than we thought. And you must be prepared for failure. We think this the most likely place. The snow shot down through a cleft in the wall up there, and this is the line of its fall. It was a gully ten to twenty feet deep, and now, you see, it is almost filled with what the snow brought down. What we seek may be buried below it all.”

“If we could only be sure even of that! What I cannot bear to think of is her being found by strangers, and stared at and wondered at——”

“I know, dear. We will do our best.”

Old Hans, judging rightly that the Fräulein was in the habit of having her own way, had thoughtfully brought three light pine poles, and they began their search.

Verney and old Hans started right below the path, probing among the fallen stones and boulders, and penetrating the depths as far as was possible. Sonia wandered along the side of the gully, peering down fearfully, lest that which she desired, but dreaded, should somewhere be lying exposed, waiting for the keen eye of love to discover it; and Billy skipped after her and peered down eagerly whenever she did.

“Go very cautiously, Sonia,” cried Verney, understanding her motive for this quick look round.

She waved her pole and went on down the slope.

In places, where the larger boulders piled roughly one on top of another, they could see well down into the depths where glimmering waters ran; but in other places the flow of rubble had packed tight and filled the gully to the brim. Anything that might be underneath it was buried for ever.

The sun passed behind the mountains at last, and the light dimmed at once, and Herr Unger straightened up and said, “We can do no more to-day, Herr. In the morning light we shall see better.” So Verney went down after Sonia and Billy, and they all returned to the hut.

Herr Unger’s forethought provided them with an ade-



quate meal. The faring, if simple, was excellent, and the mountain air had given them appetites.

In the shadow of her melancholy errand, Sonia was silent and pensive. When the men sat smoking after supper, she sat thoughtfully by the stove, with her fingers intertwined in her lap. And her thoughts ran inevitably to the past, and the sadness and the joy of it were visible in her.

"And you really never got so weary of yourself here that you had to get away down into the valleys for the sight and sound of somebody else, Herr Unger?" asked Verney, to relieve the tension of a long silence.

"Never, Herr!" and the old face lit up with a kindly glow of superior knowledge. "I had my goats, you see, and my books, and The Book, and my zither, and then there were the passers-by. Oh, no, loneliness and I never got on together, I assure you. Then I used to carve little things in wood—not that I needed the money, but it was good to be occupied."

"I wonder if you would play something for us on your zither?"

"Would the Fräulein like it?"

"Oh, I would, Herr Unger. Please do!"

And he got out the zither from its case, and keyed it up, and recharged his big pipe, and played for them sweet plaintive songs which had, in the tremulous softness of their airs and the complicated cadences of their deep-rolling bass chords, something of the wonder and mystery and uplift of the mountain-tops.

It was a marvel to Verney that hands so old and worn and rough could produce music so exquisite. But old Hans played with his heart, and that was high-tuned to the wonders and beauties among which his life had been spent. The worn old hands went wandering on over the singing strings, almost unconsciously it seemed, and melody of marvellous sweetness followed their every touch.



“But I shall tire you,” he said, his fingers still lingering lovingly among the chords.

“Oh, no, no,” said Sonia earnestly. “It does me good. Do please go on,” and the old man played on delightedly, while Verney rejoiced that her thoughts should be lifted out of the shadows.

Now and again that strange sweet music, partly learned but largely improvised, touched gently on sorrow and loss—so gently and tenderly that Sonia’s eyes brimmed with tears; and then it sang the more meaningly of hope and joy, and the triumph of that which lives over that which dies. Sonia had heard the zither often enough, but she had never heard old Hans Unger play it before.

When at last his big pipe was smoked out, and he stopped, she said, “Oh, Herr Unger, I do not know how to thank you.”

A younger man, and a smaller man, might have said, “It is nothing,” though consciously esteeming it much. Old Hans just smiled happily at her and said simply, “I too, love it dearly, Fräulein.”

“Where did you learn to play so wonderfully, Herr Unger?” asked Verney.

“My father was a greater player. This was his,” plucking the strings softly like a caress. “He taught me when I was so high, before my fingers could compass the chords properly. I suppose it is born in one to some extent. And then—I love it.”

Sonia went off to bed early, with the sweet wild strains still singing in her heart of hope and faith and love and all high things, and Verney’s kiss still warm on her hand.

“She is *wunderschöne*, the Fräulein,” said Herr Unger appreciatively. “You marry, Herr?”

“Please God, when the time comes!”

“She is worth waiting for,” said Herr Unger, with conviction.



## CHAPTER XXXVI

### GRAINS OF DUST

THEY were up and out in good time next morning, to take advantage of the early sun. For, as the rift faced east, it was only then that the full light fell on it. All the rest of the day more or less of shadow lurked under the southern edge.

All day long, with intent and sober faces, they worked downwards from the base of the path-wall, scanning with anxious trepidation everything that seemed incongruous in the hollows and crannies of the tumbled rocks.

More than once Verney's heart gave a painful kick, as something lighter coloured than its surroundings met his straining gaze. But always it turned out something different from what they sought, something quite ordinary and accountable for upon investigation,—here a lump of white rock, there the white glimmer of water or a patch of lingering snow.

Sonia's quick, all-round, preliminary search having assured her that nothing was obviously visible, she now kept close to Verney, bending anxiously when he bent, and scrutinising with him everything that caught his attention.

But after their mid-day meal their progress was slower, and the shadows under the southern edge of the rift made it difficult at times to make out what really lay below.

And suddenly, the sun was eclipsed; and, straightening up, they found the sky dark with rolling clouds whose coming they had been too busy to notice, and the valley below had sunk almost out of sight in a thin wan twilight.



"Here is thunder, Herr. We had better get inside," said Herr Unger, and reluctantly they climbed the winding way to the hut.

It was after supper, however, before the storm broke over them, and neither Sonia nor Verney had ever in their lives heard the like.

They were sitting round the stove, the two men smoking, all three waiting expectantly, when the darkness outside blazed with a sudden blinding glare, and the terrific crack and crash which followed on the instant shook Tschingellochtighorn to his base, and startled Sonia and Billy to their feet. So appalling was it, so majestically overpowering and infinitely crushing, that she felt herself no more than a grain of dust between the upper millstone of the angry heavens and the nether stone of the shuddering earth.

"Oh!" she gasped, with her hand to her heart; and Verney put his arm round her and drew her quivering to the seat at his side, while little Billy, after one startled look round, lay down again and went to sleep, and took no further interest in the matter.

"It is very near," said Herr Unger calmly, when at length the awful jarring reverberations died solemnly away among the distant peaks.

"I thought it would never end," gasped Sonia with relief.

"That was only the echoes," said Herr Unger. "You hear them well up here. But it is only the first peal that counts."

"It sounded as if those terrible clouds had all become hollow ice and were all tumbling over one another and coming down on us."

Then the lightning blazed again, and once more the mountain shook as the heavens crackled and bellowed with the awful uproar, and Sonia clung to Verney's arm as if there alone lay safety.



"How awful!" she whispered.

And Herr Unger reached out his arm and took down his zither, and began to play softly.

Again and again the lightning blazed and the thunder rattled and roared, and in between the crashes and their dreadful echoes, the sweet voice of the zither sang softly of hope and faith and love. Till at last the thunder passed, and only the voice of the zither was heard.

"It has gone on towards the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa," said Herr Unger.

"I never heard thunder like that before," said Verney.

"*Och*, I have heard it worse than that, and I have seen it strike the mountains, and blast great pieces out, and send them flying like the splinters when I chop wood."

"How awful! I would be afraid to live up here," said Sonia.

"It is as safe here as elsewhere, Fräulein, only one hears more of the noise. When one's time comes, one goes, no matter where one happens to be."

He played them into tranquil minds again, and when Sonia bade them good-night, she thanked him very prettily, and said, "It was almost worth having the thunder to hear you charm it away, Herr Unger. But I do hope it will not come back."

"It may, Fräulein. You can still hear it over there."

And it did, and more appallingly even than before.

She had fallen asleep quickly, for the nervous strain had tired her out, but she was shaken more than awake, shaken into a paroxysm of most dreadful fear, by a crash so terrific and so close above her head, that she sprang up with a cry of anguish, under the belief that the end had come.

A knocking on the door, and Verney's voice, were like sounds of heavenly reprieve.

"Are you frightened, Sonia?" he asked.



"Terribly! Terribly!" she cried.

"Put something on and come out here," and she was out in a moment, wrapped in her long coat, and almost fell into his arms.

"How dreadful" as the heavens above them seemed crashing down into ruin on top of them.

"That was very close," said Herr Unger quietly. "But it is past, and to-morrow will be fine."

"I could not stand much of this," said Sonia with a shiver. "It would get on my nerves and break me in pieces."

"That last crack was certainly appalling. How very small it makes one feel!" said Verney.

"Small?—less than nothing!"

Herr Unger crammed the stove with pine-knots and opened the door, so that the friendly blaze filled the room. And presently he took down the coffee-pot and filled three cups, and got out a bottle of Kirsch, saying, "It will do us good after all that noise," and he and Verney charged their pipes and Sonia begged a cigarette.

"If ever my nerves needed soothing they do just now," she said. "But I have hardly smoked at all since we were here before."



## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THAT WHICH THEY SOUGHT

AS Herr Unger had predicted in the storm, the next morning was brilliantly fine.

"If—nothing to-day, I think we must give it up and go home," said Sonia a little wearily, after the terrors of the night, as they went up the rough steps to the path.

"It shall be as you think best, dear. We have done what we could."

"You have been very good to fall in so with my wishes——"

"I feel just as you do in the matter, but, truly, if we cannot find what we seek, no one else is likely to do so, I think."

Herr Unger was waiting for them up above.

"See, Fräulein!" he said, very gravely, and pointed to a new raw wound in the slope below.

"It has never come quite so close to me as that, but, by God's mercy, it just missed us."

"It struck there?" asked Verney in an awed voice, while Sonia shivered in spite of the clear white sunshine and safety. For the gash riven in the mountain's side by the lightning had cleft the gully they had been searching so carefully, at an acute angle, and had bared it to the bone.

The clean-cut sides of the new cleavage glinted in the morning sun with a peculiar metallic iridescence, but what struck them most at the moment was the fact that the cutting of the gully had diverted the course of the stream



which they had heard running deep under the rocks below. It now came gushing out of the cut in the northern bank, and was making for itself a new way to the valley below.

When they got down to the gash Verney vowed it still smelt sulphurous. But Herr Unger stood looking from it to his hut, and then raised his old hat very gravely and said: "We were nearer death than we knew, last night, Fräulein and Herr. That is how it came"—with a sweep of the hand from the hut to the gash—"you see by the lie of it. It skimmed my house by a hand's-breadth, and struck here."

"Let us get back home," said Sonia, with another shiver.

"There is no lightning about just now, any way," said Verney. "And I would like to see if the diversion of the stream has done anything for us. You sit down here in the sun, dear, or would you sooner come with me?"

"I will sit here, but I am quite ready to go home now. We have done all we can," and she sank down on a boulder, with the stress of the night very plainly upon her.

Verney and Herr Unger crossed the gully above the new cleft, and went down the other side, peering into the newly-disclosed depths, and she watched them listlessly.

They had done all they could, and it was certain there was nothing to be found, and she felt worn and tired. She would be glad to be back at Unterhofen once more.

Below her the valley shimmered in a sleepy haze. The opposite slope, with its dark pine woods streaming down in points like the fringes of a ragged mantle, looked very far away. The snowy peaks behind stood calm and serene against the clear blue sky.

Everything was heavenly sweet and beautiful, and but an hour or two ago that awful storm was raging, and the brand that made that hideous cleft down there had missed them by no more than a hand's-breadth.

Verney came quickly up the slope.



"I want something from the hut," he said, and passed on up the winding path.

He was back in a couple of minutes with Herr Unger's little mirror out of her sleeping-room.

"Whatever are you going to do with that?" she asked.

"Trap the sunbeams and turn them to account," and he went down to Herr Unger, and she saw them using the mirror to deflect the sun's rays into the depths below.

They went slowly on and on along the left bank of the gully, flicking the light into the hidden depths, bending and peering intently at times and then moving slowly on again. And there came into her mind the incongruous idea that they were heliographing messages, and asking questions of Darya, lying hidden somewhere in among the black stones there.

The quick broken flashes hypnotised her as she watched. She almost feel asleep. Even when the two men stopped for a longer time than usual in one place, and then straightened up and looked at one another, it made no great impression on her. She only wondered dreamily what they doing, and how much longer they would be.

Then they both came up towards her, and Verney took her arm under his, saying very gravely—

"Let me take you to the house, Sonia dear."

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly very wide awake.

"Have you——"

"Yes."

She looked, eagerly, fearfully, at the place they had come from, her heart fluttering like a prisoned bird.

"May I not——"

"No, dear!" he said hastily, and added firmly, "For your own sake," and tightened his grip on her arm and led her away.

"You are sure?" was all she whispered, as they went.

"Quite sure, dear."



And presently, while she sat by the window with her head in her arms, but lifting it now and again almost against her will, Verney and Herr Unger went down the slope again, carrying the stretcher and a pick and spade, and she heard them at work down there, but now no longer dared to look, for dread of what she might see.

It seemed a long time before they came in. She had heard the ring and scrape of the tools on the rocks, and an occasional short word from the men, as they hauled and prised, and it seemed to her as if the dreadful sound would never end.

But she heard their feet go tramp, tramp, up the slope at last, with the heavy tread of those who carry the dead.

When they had washed their hands in the shed, Verney came to her.

"We think it best to go on at once, Sonia," and her quick up-glance showed her face white and tight-set. "Do you think you can manage the walk, dear?"

"Yes, yes! I am all right. I can manage it," and she shot up at once.

Herr Unger, with an equally grave face, was rapidly setting his little house in order. Then he picked up the kid and a heavy cloak, and with a meaning look at Verney, said,—

"You will lock the door after you, Herr," and went on in front.

When Verney and Sonia climbed up to the path, they found him and Billy standing, a little way further on, by the side of the stretcher, over which his cloak was carefully draped.

At sight of it, knowing what was below, Sonia caught her breath with a sob, and the tears ran unheeded down her cheeks.

A black wave of sorrow surged over her. It was all so pitiful.



The last time they three travelled this path they were all so full of hope. The great undertaking had seemed crowned with success, their troubles were almost over, Darya was rejoicing in her freedom and her new hopes in life, and she herself was happier than ever she had been since Darya was taken from her.

And then, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, everything was changed.

And now—

It was as sad a little procession as ever trod that path down Tschingellochtighorn—Herr Unger and Verney bore the stretcher with its light burden between them, Sonia walked behind. Little Billy alone showed no signs of depression, or of anything but extremest joy of life. He trotted to and fro incessantly, the light-hearted marshal of the lugubrious little *cortège*, and jarred Sonia's nerves at times by whisking past her and standing in obviously precarious attitudes on the extreme edge of the path.

The sun shone gaily, the sky was blue without a cloud, the soaring white peaks were heavenly fair to look upon.

But of the three, Herr Unger was the only one to whom these things spoke that day. Death was no stranger to him. He had met him in many forms, had looked into his grim eyes many times. He had no fear of him. And these two strangers, whom he held in such high esteem, had accomplished that for which they came, and so for their sakes he was glad.

But Verney, being rear-bearer, and having seen what the stretcher held, and having had but small acquaintance with Death, could think of nothing else, could only with an effort keep his eyes off it. Poor little Darya! Poor, poor child!

And Sonia saw nothing but the path swimming mistily below her, and Billy's upsetting diversions, and always Verney's broad shoulders, pushing steadily on in front and



knew that she must keep up with them, though the one thing she wanted to do at the moment was to stretch herself on a bed and weep till her sorrow was spent.

She knew it was weak; she knew that this pitiful thing in front was not Darya; she knew that her dear one was safe above all life's griefs and fears, as she might never have been if she had lived; but all the same she wanted to lie down and weep, and that swimming mountain-path seemed as if it had no end. She walked on and on as in a nightmare, and knew that she would walk that dreadful path in her dreams for many a night to come.

But they came at last to Artelen, and rested there for a time, while Herr Unger found another bearer to take Verney's place.

When they set out again Verney silently placed her arm in his, and the strength and comfort of it were like new life to her.

His heart had ached for her over every foot of that gruesome journey, but he had had his work to do, and he could not comfort her over his shoulder. And, moreover, it seemed to him that she would prefer being alone with her sorrow for a time.

They walked on for a very long time without speaking, and he could feel how the journey was trying her.

"Lean more on me, dear," he urged at last. "I am sure you are tired out. It has been very trying for you."

"I have been leaning on you since the first day we met," she said, with a sad little humour.

"And I have been glad to be leant on."

"You have been very, very good to me."

"And what do you think you have been to me?"

"Always a burden, still a burden," she said, with a sigh of weariness.

"We both know better than that," and the pressure of his arm upon hers was very comforting to her.



"Can you . . . tell me anything. . ." she asked presently, and he knew what was in her mind.

"Herr Unger has had much experience. He says she could not have suffered at all. The first blow killed her."

"Thank God for that!" she said, with a little sob. "He is quite sure?"

"He is quite sure."

And after a time she said, "I have thought and thought, and I cannot see that we were to blame in the matter."

"To blame, dear? Surely not. No one was to blame. We were doing our best for her as we saw it. God saw better still. . . We will lay her to rest in that quiet place at Adelboden, and then your heart will be at peace concerning her."

And that, next day, they did, with no intrusion on the privacy of their sorrow on the part of the authorities, but only utmost sympathy and assistance, and by the evening they were back at Unterhofen.

Verney spent two days with them at the Château, restful days packed full of happiness, and rejoiced to know that this sombre journey, if it had borne somewhat heavily upon her, had still set Sonia's mind at rest.

The past had buried its dead, and for the future they could wait and trust.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII

“COME—SONIA!”

VERNEY had hardly settled down again to the easy routine of his work in Paris, when a hurried summons carried him to London to the death-bed of his uncle, Lord Mount-Severne, to whose title and estates he succeeded.

Diplomacy, however, was his chosen profession, and he had no intention of relinquishing it. Within a fortnight he was back in Paris, anxious chiefly for the swift passage of the months that intervened between him and St. Peter's-insel, where he was to join Madame di Garda and Sonia in September.

They corresponded regularly, but there was never a word in the letters which passed the limits imposed on them by the circumstances of the case, or which might not have been published to the world without reproach.

As August dragged slowly on, he grew restless, and found the heavy hot days longer than ever they had been before.

When September was fairly in, he counted the hours till he could set eyes once more on the green Bieler See, and that soft round cushion of a fairy isle which had wrought such a change in his life.

He would have liked to carry with him presents for Sonia which, in their number and costliness, should in some sort express the feeling that was in him. But he would not, though it was hard to deny himself; and at times he came to doubt if he was not carrying his quixotic feeling in the matter to quite unnecessary lengths.



He had, however, set his own bounds according to his conscience, and he kept himself rigidly within them. He would take her himself, and all the warmth of his whole heart's love and devotion, and he thought she would understand.

They were in one of Life's difficult impasses. Cruel Circumstance had scrawled "No Thoroughfare" across their path. They must, and would, bear themselves accordingly.

He was to leave on the fifteenth, and was all ready the day before—more than ready, aching to board the P.L.M. express and feel himself really *en route* for Sonia.

His train left at ten. Five o'clock next morning would land him at Pontarlier. By eight he would be at Neuchâtel, and in deliciously sleepy little Neuveville soon after nine; and, if the *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* was too lazy to start just then, he would hire a boat, and a man to bring it back, and pull himself across. He could almost hear the joyous squeak of the oars on their pins, and feel the leap of the clumsy boat, as he drove it beyond its wildest record across the smooth green lake to Sonia.

Where would he find her, he wondered. Waiting for him at the landing-place?—or more modestly at the old red house?—or, most delightfully of all, behind the big beech-tree on the hill, from which she had sprung so amazingly into his life, just twelve months before?

Well, no matter where, he knew he would find her unchanged except for the better—quieter in her mind than she had been then, and happier in every way.

So anxious was he to feel really *en route*, that he found himself at the Gare de Lyon soon after eight o'clock, and laughed at himself as he tramped impatiently to and fro, and would have given the easy-going officials a hand in hastening matters if that had been practicable.

It was still a considerable time before the train would



start when, to his surprise, he saw one of the Embassy messengers on the platform peering into carriage after carriage in evident search of some one. Possibly himself, and his heart gave an impatient kick at the thought that some abominable diplomatic complication might have developed itself for the sole hideous purpose of postponing his meeting with Sonia.

He must know, however. If duty called, even Sonia must wait. He would have to wire her at St. Peter's, and the fat boy in the slow old boat would take it stolidly across to her from Ligerz, and the hope in her face would be shadowed, but she would give the fat boy a franc for himself all the same, and then she would begin immediately to hope again.

"Hello, Armstrong! Anything for me?"

"Telegram, sir—came just after you'd left. We thought it might be important, so I came along with it."

"That was very good of you," and he ripped open the envelope, with such assumption of unconcern as he could manage, when his heart was beating dull with apprehension of ill news.

It was from St. Peter's-insel and contained only two words—the two finest words in the whole world's languages for him—

"Come—Sonia."

"All right, sir?" asked Armstrong, as a preliminary to departure.

"Quite all right, thank you, Armstrong! I am obliged to you for bringing it. No, nothing to send back. Good-bye and *au revoir*!"

"From his young lady, *I* should say," said Armstrong to himself, as he looked again at the twenty-franc piece in his hand.

"Come—Sonia."

And did she think then that he could possibly have for-



gotten that she was expecting him?—that in the fearful rush and stress of diplomatic affairs in September he had overlooked the fact that he was due at St. Peter's next day?

He laughed joyously to himself, and consulted his watch again to make sure it had not stopped.

And there was such a glad look of contentment with all the world in his face, that a small peasant person of three or so, who had rambled away from her natural protectors, and found herself momentarily bewildered by the unusual size of the world, caught hold of his leg for safety and laughed up at him. And he would have kissed her as he handed her over to her apologetic mother, if her face had been a little cleaner, so he gave her a franc instead, which did quite as well.

"Come—Sonia."

She could not possibly have imagined that he needed any reminder—not possibly.

Then what was the meaning of it?

Could she be in any difficulty—and this an urgent call for help? Aunt Olga! Perhaps she had been taken suddenly ill, and Sonia, all alone there with her, craves his help.

It might mean anything, but in any case it told him that Sonia was alive and waiting for him at St. Peter's.

He ran across to the telegraph office and wired her: "*En route*. With you early to-morrow"—so that any possible anxiety as to his coming might be removed.

"Come—Sonia."

What *could* it mean?

Could it be that the sight of her at St. Peter's had recalled to the authorities the fact that she was there when their prisoner escaped from Ste. Julienne last year—and, putting two and two together, were they causing her annoyance?



Could it possibly be—but it was a long time before he got to that, and only when he had exhausted every other supposition—that anything had happened to Sordavala?

And at that his heart beat furiously.

Before God, he said to himself, he had no wish for the man's hurt. He would not—he could not—lift a finger if by doing so he could blot him out of her remembrance for ever. But, all the same, he did most earnestly desire to see Sonia free of him—not for his own sake but for hers. And he could no more help desiring that than he could help breathing.

Sonia, loosed from that miserable tie, would be Sonia free to live her life to the full, in whatever direction it might lie. It would mean a new Sonia, with all the dead past buried and done with. And it would mean joy inexpressible to him, even though their lives thereafter lay far apart.

“Come—Sonia!”

He could not sleep. He stretched himself in his berth in the sleeping-car, and had never felt so wide awake in his life. He went back to the restaurant-car and drank coffee and smoked. If he closed his eyes the words glowed in fiery curves on that inner darkness. When he looked out into the night they were racing merrily along in the darkness there, and the clanking wheels below were shouting, “I'm coming, coming, coming!”

Pontarlier at last, *Dieu merci!*—and out into the chill of the dawn for more hot coffee at the buffet, and a sandwich roll to munch as he tramped the platform, and watched the sun come up over the great gateposts of the Promised Land, with as grand a deliberation as the railway people showed in getting ready the train for Verrières.

Off at last—a perfunctory visit from a courteous Customs officer, who accepted his word for it that he was not in the smuggling line—Verrières—Val de Travers—many



tunnels—Neuchâtel Lake sparkling in the morning sunshine—and at last Neuchâtel itself.

No train north for nearly two hours. A carriage and pair then, from the hotel opposite the station, as quickly as they can be put together. It will only save him an hour, but he cannot stand about and wait—for Sonia, over on St. Peter's-insel yonder, is calling "Come!"

A word to the driver, and the horses enter into the spirit of it. Hauterive up on the left, and St. Blaise on the right, within ten minutes of the start! Cornaux—and Cressier—and there is wooded Jolimont—and the Thielle, up whose waters he rowed Sonia to meet Darya, that dark night, when he had only known her two days—and there, across the flats, is Ste. Julienne itself, where the poor child's heart had beaten itself against the bars.

And here is the Bieler See—and Landeron—and there, as soon as the corner is turned, is the blessed little Isle of Peace itself; and it is not yet nine o'clock, and the train from Neuchâtel will not start for still another hour.

And there across the water is the *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, panting leisurely along the green jungle of the peninsula from St. Peter's to Erlach, and it will not make the return journey till after eleven, no, not even though you take five full first-class return tickets at one franc each all for yourself.

So—a boat and a man!—and in another five minutes Neuveville was in their wake, and the oars squeaked joyously on their pins, and the clumsy boat leaped to his stroke, as he urged it to unwonted speed across the lake to Sonia.

"Shall I carry Monsieur's bag to the hotel?" asked his boatman, as they made the wooden landing-stage.

"No, just heave it up here. I will send for it. Thanks! Here you are!" and as the boatman pulled lazily back to Neuveville, he reckoned how soon he could buy up the town



if only he had two or three customers like that every day of his life.

Verney stood for a moment, bareheaded, recalling the first time he set foot on that rickety little wooden pier, and all that had come of it. And he was grateful for it all, but chiefly at finding himself there again, and not as a stranger in an undiscovered country, but as the one to whom Sonia called, “Come!”

He went swiftly along the sedgy path through the low-lying outer belt of trees, to the great granite wall which marked the island proper.

He passed up the incline which had once been a boat-landing, and crossed the rich firm turf, spread thick with purple crocuses.

And at this time he did not hesitate as to which of the various paths he would take. He went straight up the hill towards the beech of many memories, with a spring in his step that told its own tale—tripped on a hidden pine-root, the very same skulker which had tripped him once before and had been lying in wait for him ever since—and as he recovered himself he heard the sweetest voice in the world saying—

“Oh, my dear! How glad I am to see you!” and Sonia stepped out from behind the big beechtree and fairly fell into his arms, laughing and crying all at the same time.

“You may kiss me,” she said, in a voice and a way that were so new to him that his heart jumped, and the blood went tingling through his veins like hot wine, and he knew that something had come to pass.

He kissed her as she wished—for the first time; and she put her arms round his neck and kissed him back, murmuring, “My dear! My dear!”

“And now, dear, tell me your news,” he said eagerly. “I know you too well to think we are out of bounds.”

“There are no bounds.”



"Thank God!" he said fervently. "Sit here with your back against our beech and tell me all about it," and he sat down at her feet on the cushiony pine needles, and watched her eloquent face.

"We got word only yesterday, though it happened over a month ago. I told you the kind of man he was, harsh and cruel and treacherous. He was transferred from Kara because of his cruelties. It only made him worse. A prisoner out there in Yakutsk killed him with an axe because of his ill-treatment."

"And it is beyond all doubt?"

"We had the word officially directed from Petersburg, yesterday. It is beyond all possibility of doubt. The letters reached us at Unterhofen, and we packed up at once and came on here, and I wired you as soon as we arrived. I knew it would puzzle you, but I could not explain in a telegram. What did you think?"

"I thought everything under the sun—and moon—and stars."

"This included?"

"Yes—this included! First I had a crazy idea that you thought I might possibly have forgotten the day and hour and the minute when I was to be allowed to come to you. Then I thought Aunt Olga might have been taken suddenly ill. Then, that the Ste. Julienne people might be on to you. Then—oh, all kinds of things all through the night. I never slept one wink——"

"Poor old boy!"

"And, finally, I wondered if anything could have happened to Sordavala. I have never wished him ill, Sonia. But from the very bottom of my heart I say now: Thank God you are free of him!"

"Yes. Thank God! . . . Kiss me again, dear, to tell me I am free!"















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